ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF INDIAN ENGLISH CRITICISM

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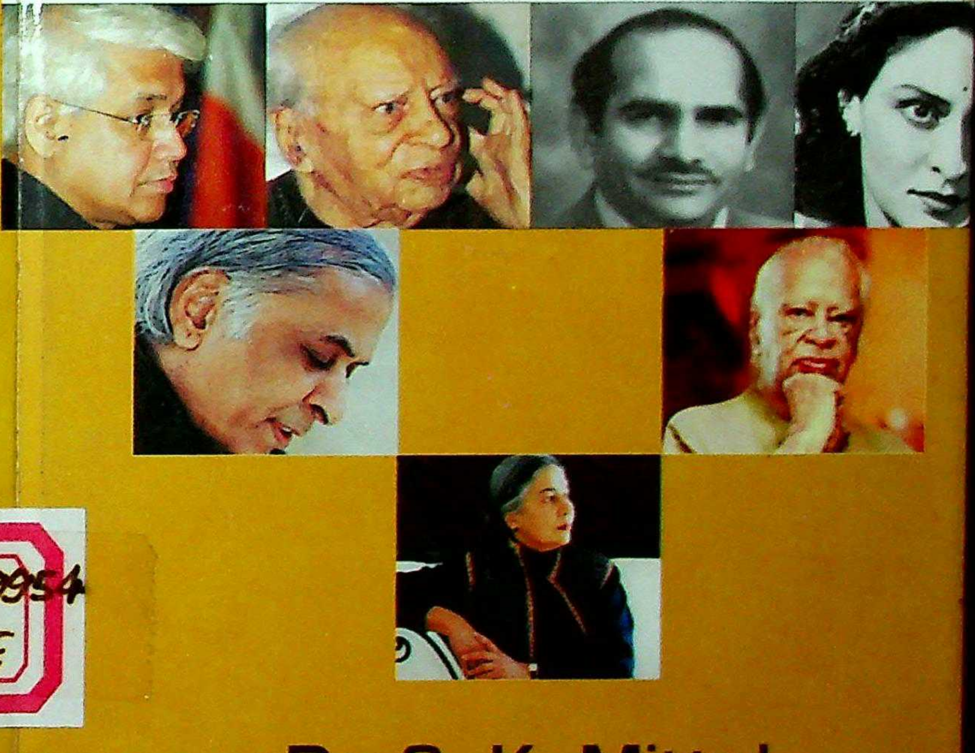

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ENCYCLOPAEDIA
OF
INDIAN ENGLISH CRITICISM

(ANITA DESAI: A CRITICAL STUDY)

Vol. 1

Editor

Dr. S. K. Mittal
Raj Shekhar

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PREFACE

Indian English literature is an endeavour of showcasing the rare gems of Indian writing in English. From being a curious native explosion, Indian English has become a new form of Indian culture and voice in which India speaks. While Indian authors, poets, novelists, essayists, dramatists have been making significant contributions to world literature since the pre-Independence era, the past few years have seen a massive flourishing of Indian English writing in the international market. Not only are the works of Indian authors writing in English soaring on the best-seller list, they are also receiving a great deal of critical acclaim. Starting from Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Toru Dutt to Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Allan Sealy, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra … the parade of fine Indian writers is long and lengthening.

Present-day India boasts an English-language literature of energy and diversity and has spawned a striking literary diaspora. Some writers of Indian descent (V. S. Naipaul , Bharati Mukherjee) now reject the ethnic label of 'Indian writers'. Mukherjee sees herself as American, while Naipaul would perhaps prefer to be read as an artist from nowhere and everywhere. For some Indian critics, English-language Indian writing is a post-colonial anomaly; its continuing use of the old colonial tongue is seen as a fatal flaw and renders it inauthentic. However, others have argued that English became a naturalized subcontinental language long ago. And it is part of the achievement of English-language Indian writers to have found literary voices as distinctively Indian, but also suitable for all purposes of art, as those other languages forged in Ireland, Africa, the West Indies, and the United States.

Encyclopaedia of Indian English Criticism is prepared keeping in view of the Indian students undergoing P.G. and U.G. in different Indian Universities. All authors and their works are selected strictly following the latest syllabus. Critical discussions are examination oriented. This encyclopaedia is a huge source of reference for scholars and teachers. The major works of selected authors are critically analysed taking help of different expert critics and research scholars working on those particular authors.

Editors

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Introduction

Indian novelist and short story writer, especially noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. Several of Anita Desai's novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class women. In her later novels Desai has dealt with such themes as German anti-Semitism, the demise of traditions, and Western stereotypical views of India.

"Even though his cigarette stank, it was a local one, wrapped in a *tendu* leaf, fierce enough to make his head swim, he could smell the distinctive Indian odour of dung, both of cattle and men, of smoke from the village hearts, of cattle food and cattle urine, of dust, of pungent food cooking, of old ragged clothes washed without soap and put out to dry, the aroma of poverty." (From *Baumgartner's Bombay*, 1988)

Anita Desai was born in Mussoorie, a hill station north of Delhi, the daughter of a D.N. Mazumdar, a Bengali businessman, and the former Toni Nime, of German origin. She began to write in English at the age of seven, and published her first story at the age of nine. Desai was educated in Delhi at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School and Miranda House, Delhi University, where she received in 1957 a B.A. in English literature. In the following year she married Ashvin Desai, a businessman; they had four children.

As a novelist Desai made her debut in 1963 with *The Peacock*. She had started to write short stories regularly before her marriage. *The Peacock* was published in Britain by Peter Owen, a publisher specializing in literature of the British

Commonwealth and continental Europe. It was followed by *Voices of the City* (1965), a story about three siblings, Amla, Nirode, and Monisha, and their different ways of life in Calcutta. Amla sees the city as a monster, Nirode sacrifices everything for her career, and Monisha cannot bear her stifling existence in the household of a wealthy old Calcutta family. *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), set in Kasuli, a hill station, focused on three women and their complex experiences in life.

"No one, said Bim, slowly and precisely, comprehends better than children do. No one feels the atmosphere more keenly or catches the nuances, all the insinuations in the air or notes those details that escape elders because their senses have atrophied, or calcified." (from *Clear Light of Day*, 1980)

In *Clear Light of Day* (1980) Desai wove the history of Delhi with a middle class Hindu family. The central character is Bim (short for Bimla) Das, a history professor, an independent woman. Bim's memories of the family past dominate her sterile existence, she feels betrayed by her unambitious sister Tara, and replays her memories in the decaying family mansion in Old Delhi. Their mentally retarded brother-in-law plays old records. Tara do not understand why Bim doesn't want anything to change, when she rejects the hopeless atmosphere of the house. "It seemed to her that the dullness and the boredom of her childhood, her youth, were stored here in the room under the worn dusty red rugs, in the bloated brassware, amongst the dried grasses in the swollen vases, behind the yellowed photographs in the oval frames everything, everything that she had so hated as a child and that was still preserved here as if this were the storeroom of some dull, uninviting provincial museum." The summer of 1947 has divided the nation and the family, Hindus and Muslims are torn apart by Partition. Through Tara's and Bim's consciousness Desai examines the same events from different points of views.

The author's characters in many novels are members of the Anglicised Indian bourgeoisie, whose marital problems are in the forefront. Her characters often adopt escapist ways to cope with the boring everyday life or world outside comfortable living. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) Sita, pregnant with her fifth child, takes refuge from her marriage on the magical island homestead of her deceased father. Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* withdraws into a private world of self-willed isolation. Desai has commented on her work: "My novels are no reflection of Indian society, politics or character. They are my private attempt to seize upon the raw material of life." In *The Zigzag Way* (2004), Desai departed from her familar territories and set the story of identity and self discovery in Mexico.

In the mid-1980s Desai started to look more closely the life of the unprivileged. *In Custody* (1984) is Desai's ironic story about literary traditions and academic illusions. The central characters are Nur, an Urhi poet, who has fallen on hard times, and Deven, a professor of Hindi, who realises that the beloved poet is not the magical genius he has imagined.

The author's own German half of the parental heritage is in the background of *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) Desai's first language was German. In the story a retired Jewish businessman has escaped in his youth the Nazis to India and stayed there in poverty, taking care of stray cats. "His eyes were short sighted and blinked half-shut against the glare that thrust itself in at the door and so he did not notice that watchman's expression as he passed him on his perch under the wooden board that bore the tenants' names, Hiramani, Taraporevala, Barodekar, Coelho, da Silva, Patel, mumbled 'Good morning, *salaam*', and went down the steps into the street with his bag, uncertain as ever of which language to employ. After fifty years, still uncertain, Baumgartner, *du Dummkopf*." A German hippie enters Baumgartner's life and his reclusive existence is shattered. In both of these books Desai has given her answer to critics, who have concluded that her characters are usually westernised middle-class professionals and therefore their problems are more close to those of Western readers than to majority of Indian people. In *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) Desai examined the nature of pilgrimage to India through three characters, Mateo and Sophie, young Europeans, and Mother, a charismatic and mysterious woman, whose story is an earlier version of their own. Desai's perspective on India is more European than in his earlier works. *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) contrasted American and Indian culture, and male and female roles. Arun studies in Massachusetts, his sister Uma lives in India in a small provincial city. Uma lives with her parent whom she calls MamaPapa. "It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existence, that they had been separate entities and not MamaPapa in one breath... Mama Papa themselves rarely spoke of a time when they were not one. The few anecdotes they related separately acquired great significance because of their rarity, their singularity." Uma's attempts to leave home and marry create a disaster. The novel was a finalist for the 1999 Booker Prize.

"Poor Raman was placed in one of the lower ranks of the companies's hierarchy. That is, he did not belong to a British concern, or even to an American-collaboration one, but merely to an Indian one. Oh, a long-established, prosperous and solid one but, still, only Indian. Those cigarettes that he passed around were made by his own company. Somehow it struck a note of bad taste amongst these fastidious men who played golf, danced at the club on Independence Eve and New Year's Eve, invited at least one foreign couple to every party and called their decorative wives 'darling' when in public." ('The Farewell Party' in *Games at Twilight*, 1978)

Since the 1950s Desai has lived in New Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, and other Indian cities. She has been a member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has taught at Girton College and Smith College in England, and at Mount Holyoke College in the United States. In 1993 she became a creative writing teacher at

Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has spent there for one semester each year and the rest of her time in India. Desai is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London. She received the Guardian Award for Children's Fiction for the novel *The Village by the Sea* (1982), and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award for *Fire on the Mountain*.

Desai is one of the most prolific writers of serious fiction in Indian English. With *Cry, the Peacock* her literary career began in 1963, although she had been writing and publishing short stories since her adolescence. Her early childhood was spent in Mussoorie and that endowed her with almost a mystic, abundantly romantic sense of connection with the living, teeming world of nature. Her unpretentious childhood would be surrounded by a large number of pets-eats, dogs and birds. Proximity with the natural world crystallises in her characters overwhelming alellness to flora and fauna, the mystery, beauty and solitude of the nature's bounty. From her cross-cultural upbringing, Indian Bengali father and German mother, she and her siblings inherited wonderful stories, lyrics, music and art that were to form the substance of her writings. Later her study of English literature at Delhi University made her an inveterate and accomplished reader of most of the modern Western literature and inspired her to write in English.

She sees English as a language that has been traveling for centuries all over the face of earth and wherever English goes, it seems to adapt itself to those different conditions. The spectacular range of her novels: *Cry. the Peacock, Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay (1988), Journey to Ithaca* (1996), *Fasting. Feasting* (1999) and *The Zigzag Way* (2004) certainly establish her as the pioneer of a new, more radical genre of fiction in India, having conspicuous affinities with international trends and sensibilities. Undoubtedly her fecund and imaginatively rich portrayals resonate with the finest tradition of the West. Desai's privileged cultural background availed her easy access to the western classics. The novelists who preceded her, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and others who were her corollaries also drew their narrative modes as well as notions of the inner world of men and women, from the Western world of knowledge that the literary canons inhabited. Desai's ingenuity lies in lending her observation of life with profound poetic content that makes a sensitive reader feel the touches of Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson, Rimbaud, Rilke, Hopkins, Proust, Virginia Woolf. D.H. Lawrence, and several other proponents of the evolving literary consciousness. In an interview, she puts it, "In my twenties when I first began to work seriously and consciously on my novels, it was D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Marccl Proust that influenced me more strongly." (Srivastava, 1984: 224--25)

Novels and poetry, like other fields of Western knowledge, have been the part of literary culture and aesthetics of the twentieth century societies for their subtlety, imagination and revelations. This truth cannot be debated that the reception of Western mode of knowledge in all fields was not confined to the western readers. Almost all developing, conscious and English educated non-western cultures responded to the modern western literature with alacrity since it exposed with unprecedented impact the innermost labyrinths of the phenomenon, called man in terms that were found identifiable across cultures, ethnicity and nationalities. Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse (1927)* clearly define the history of novel in the twentieth century in their revelations of a more problematic concept of human nature. David Daiches insightfully perceives the difficult struggle of the modern novel with the empirical, existential truths and its endeavour to grasp the fragile, elusive inner core of human psychology:

Every human being is the prisoner of his own private consciousness, his unique train of association, which results in turn from his own unique past. The public gestures he makes towards communication can never be more than approximate, and he can rely on their being understood. Indeed insofar as the gestures are public, they are bound to be falsified. The signals each individual flashes to the public world are bound to be in some degree misunderstood by the world, because every other person will read them in the light of the person's own history. Society is thus in a sense unreal; it: institutions inevitably blunt and coarsen the truth about an individual self, providing means of communication that can distort.

Novel as a European all form became thoroughly global and in India whether in indigenous ethnic languages or in English, the matrices of the novel's narrative were quintessentially drawn from the western models. Western novels shaped our democratic, liberal humanistic sensibility and were naturally recruited as the part of postcolonial culture of the growing Indian educated middle class. The rise of Indian novel in English or novel at large in other languages reveal that the novel began as a European art form, it grew however to become thoroughly global in its conventions drawing its subjects and issues from the indigenous or local contexts.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century and early twenty first, the basic form of novel in the West or India or elsewhere has remained unchanged untouched by any further experiment. Alan Ryan in "A Growth of a Global Culture" observes that changes there have been, but only in the same direction as the popular culture has taken greater tolerance of explicit sexual description, a greater acceptance of dysfunctional families, more rapid and violent actions. (Howard and Louis, 1998: 74)

In a naturally multilingual India of today, writing or speaking in English is no longer a reflection of alienation from one's roots, or degradation or colonisation or incapability for innovation. Since generations, Indians are speaking

English. Desai uses it not only as a language of empowerment having international reach but also as a language of identity of Indian experiences. Her writing in English and the desire to find a new and different territory to question the tradition, going beyond realism, evolving the narrative of consciousness make some critics see her as westernised. In an interview Desai considers erroneous the view that her writing is westernised: "If my writing is westernised there is a whole section of Indian society that is westernised. Whole range of people brought up in urban areas have been ex-posed to Western ideas through literature." (Uniyal, 2000:251)

The detailed discussions in the following reveal that she presents Indian cultural practices even deeply indigenous, local, milieu and landscape with as much competence and familiarity as Nadine Gordimer's rendering of South African subaltern realities. Along with Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya, Desai's engagement with the deeper layers of our cultural institutions, modes of survival of men and women moving through time demonstrate that the novel is the only literary idiom across several languages in India in which women have participated in sufficient number. These writers however belonged to a generation that found itself without a systematic history or precedence. It was therefore for them to relate to the history of their culture anew in order to forge in literary terms the consciousness of their gender in the flux of history.

In the late Fifties at a time when chauvinistic values were attached to their sex, writing as woman was still a concept fraught with controversies. Women were confined to low category romantic fiction, published in serialised form in women's magazines in English and other Indian languages, Desai's output immediately drew attention because of its higher standard.

Neither callow, mawkish nor sentimental, her stories resonated with humour, poetry, the power of exact image, the ability to be both detached, hard and compassionate, a sense of place, all the strategies of impersonation and finally a historical gaze.

Desai seems to defy most male assumptions of female writing. One of them is that women's style is inferior to that achieved by male novelists, since the female writer cannot transcend the limitation of the immediate: the beginning of a woman's work is generally the writing of a personal diary. Secondly the popular view that the woman's heroine is always a glorified version of herself and therefore she is further restricted by the narrowness of her perception and understanding. Thirdly that a passion for detail is the distinguishing mark of nearly every female novelist. That is, the woman's novels are also deficient in construction, since their authors cannot take the broad view, the female intellect cannot strain so far, it is the neutrality of the artistic mind which the female novelists seem to find it too difficult to realise. In the West, male advice to women writers that they should confine themselves to miniature had been made an issue of controversy. Louise Bernikow notes, "A woman writer constantly pits herself against cultural expectations of 'womanhood' and women's writing; it becomes necessary for a woman to overcome her sex to write."

In India, however, during the period Desai started writing, it was an established norm that women were inferior writers. She became a conspicuous presence because of her gender and like her other contemporaries was subjected to condescending or generalised opinions. D.S. Maini discerns in Desai moments of lyric beauty and intensity but lacking in great scenes, "no great inventions of events and episodes that bring out the dramatic potential of her characters." Maini proceeds to observe that so long her moral vision remains subservient to the poetic and metaphysical urges of her imagination, there cannot be much hope for her development. Being a Henry James scholar Maini seems to evaluate Desai by the parameters of James's novels as "high drama of consciousness."

Desai's spectacular growth since the 1960s when her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* was published is worth watching. True to the genre of women's writing across the globe, Desai's commitment to an individual's perception of a situation turned upside down the valorised notions of "character"; consciousness pre-ceded and prevailed over 'character." Her narrative of consciousness dispenses with plotting action packed drama in favour of capturing the lived, felt intense moments in the lives of men and women questing for identity. The analysis of novels in the following chapters will reveal that the intimate glimpses into diverse kinds of lives are not without the strain of moral questioning or spiritual struggle for right conduct. Her stories may nor outwardly wear their messages, because of the imbedded irony. Truth always exists within the creation of her narrative itself as a contingent uneasy harmony. In the interiority of her characters, Desai discerns un imagined dimensions and relates them with elegiac compassion and tenderness.

Although she admits in an interview her intense self-consciousness in translating some ethnic Indian rituals like a wedding ceremony or a funeral, her grasp of typically Indian rituals, cultural practices, social codes, education system, the configurations of class, gender and caste in Indian society testifies to her ability to imaginatively participate in diverse social practices and beliefs. Sarla's disgruntled life of endless fatigue and uninspiring domesticity in a rural dusting town in *In Custody* or Uma's story of corrosive patriarchal oppression and the resultant psychic annihilation in *Fasting, Feasting* could by no means be the narrator's personal account and yet, she seems to identify the characters as if in states of self-introjection; the novel is an illustration of "a woman writer's wider evolution of self-awareness that finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society" (Showalter, 1977: 11).

It is perhaps Desai's acute self-consciousness as well as detachment that makes her probe and enter into the culture specific moments or cross-cultural sensibilities with psychological realism. Her narrative therefore brings into being fully realised characters, fully realised social contexts, patterns of behaviour; rich intricate and alive; description of landscape, both Indian and foreign or even an obscure small town, Deven's Mirpore. Maya's solipsistic introversions and grief of lovelessness, Bim's claustrophobic self-doubts, Nirode's obsessive cynicism, Deven's underdog status, Nur's obscene profligacy and Sita's passionate dedication to her anonymity and autonomy spring *from* Desai's sense of belonging to India and not just empathy-knowing deeply, intuitively and caring sincerely. Nadine Gordimer's perception of herself, her ability to enter into entirely different experiences with amazing familiarity as well as detachment applies to Anita Desai also. Gordimer puts it thus:

> Because the observation, heightened beyond the normal, that implies extraordinary disinvolvement, rather a double process, excessive preoccupation and identification with the lives of others and at the same time monstrous detachment, for identification brings the superficial loyalties (that is to the self) or concealment and privacy, while detachment brings the harsher fidelities (to the truth about the self or revealment and exposure).

Desai does imbibe the posture, both of standing apart and being fully involved that enables her to see in the lives of people a lot more than they can see themselves.

In the novels of intercultural contacts Desai does not appear to be enamoured with the eurocentric cultural ideology or with the point of view of her white characters, nor does she present her Indian characters look pathetic in comparison. Therefore *Journey to Ithaca* is by no means worthy of being clubbed with Gita Mehta's *Karma Kola*.

The most recent novel *The Zig-Zag Way* takes its protagonist to moods and states of mind and hidden inward passages. Into the uncanny quietude, Eric taps parts of himself generally observed by routinised life. Like Laila and

Matteo of *Journey to Ithaca,* Eric would desire to be "enthralled by some mysterious spell."

The discussion of *Fasting, Feasting* in Chapter would reveal that if a family is an institute that stifles lives of women in India, in the United States also in varied ways women are exposed to pain of rejection in familial relations. Parents let children down, children are badly parented. Women in India and the West make substantial emotional investment in relation with men. Women are often socialised to develop their sense of self from the relationship. When women feel that the quality of their relationship is poor, it impacts their well being. Men in contrast derive their sense of self worth from the achievement at their work place.

Acerbic satire at the expense of her characters in diasporic relations has not been Desai's forte, as it requires deeper involvement, covert contempt that Desai's compassionate but detached vision does not sanction. Besides it is worth observing that her vision of history and India is as strongly immersed in the ethos of Indian culture as that of Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, R.K. Narayan and Salman Rushdie. All of them have chosen to take different artistic directions and the choices of subject matter. Despite being half, German, her fiction collectively forges the consciousness of the terrible fluidity of things human and non-human. *Journey to Ithaca* culminates this consciousness, dormant in several of her earlier texts.

East-West encounter and the immigrant experiences are treated in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* with sureness and as much credibility as Kamala Markandaya in *Nowhere Man.* Desai may not be as intense in her anger, in her indictment of the pathological racism of the British, but both she and Markandaya reveal with poignant touches the "psyche of the unhoused" states. *Baumgartner's Bombay,* the story of a German Jew could be read as a poignant tale of homelessness brought about by the racism prevailing during Hitler's regime, the experience of deracination and displacement.

Exposure to diverse cultures as an itinerant; and alertness to histories enable Desai to probe with intuitive insight into Indian cultural milieu, varied strata of Indian society-the upper middle class, the middle-middle class, and the poor and deprived. The complex range of her fictional narrative carves and inscribes many dimensions of our plural Indian realities in interaction with Indian sub-continental history as well as global cultural changes. Her core interest nevertheless remains the lives of women. Unlike Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Two Virgins*, Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence, The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning*, who have touched subjects like rape and seduction, the female body, gestation and procreation in terms, which were unprecedented.

Desai ponders on the theme of love, betrayal, marriage, bereavement and the problems of compatibility, failure in relationship, the issue of maternity, the stigma of barrenness or not bearing male children. In comparison to Shashi Deshpande particularly, Desai takes several perspectives to maternity and women's relation to the childbirth, rearing and caring. Maternal bonding in Deshpande's treatment flows with deep feelings. Like Saru or Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Desai's Maya would seek enormous satisfaction in having a child. When "she had put the inexperienced greedy, sucking mouth (Renu's) to her nipple" (Deshpande, 1980: 147). But Desai would also dare probe into other variations of experiences as in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* In this context, her Sita is closer to Margaret Drabble's Jane in *Waterfall:*

> to kiss and care for and feed and amuse a small child merely rein-forced my sense of division-I felt spiit between the anxious intelligent woman and the healthy and efficient mother or perhaps less split than divided. (1969: 110)

Desai's ability to get down to brass tacks comes to terms with what it means to be a woman in India in particular in relation to the domestic and familial space which serves both as a nurturer and destroyer of feminine lives. The growth of feminine lives from infancy through adolescence, youth to old age occupy the interest of Desai's outstanding works. Her drawings of women bring to the fore a salutary challenge to most male Indian writers who have dealt with women; she dares to offer her correctives to the male convention of depicting that and shows that femininity is beyond nomenclature. Even though quite a few of her novels assign pivotal roles to male characters, women are always the sub-text or the subterranean unconscious of the text, inevitably so because it is the woman writer whose perspectives define and probe the identity of male characters.

It is worth watching that characters like Gautama, Nirode or even Adit and Dev are susceptible to the 'writerly gaze' of the woman novelist who in shifting perspectives takes ironic view of their superior assumption of themselves. However Desai's involvement with some other male characters as Hugo Baumgartner in diasporic situation and Deven as a product of social underprivileged background, and upbringing that failed to foster in him self-confidence and self-reliance lend them the ironic persona of displaced or variant feminised male. The private consciousness of men, women and children, the drives of nature-love, death, sense of facticity take on a powerful aura in her depiction. Anxious insecurity, brutal murder, neurotic disability, death, criminal assault and violent ends in her confront the complacent conventional Indian reader with the shocking aspects of social and domestic relationship. From *Cry, the Peacock* through *Fire on the Mountain* to *Fasting, Feasting*, she collectively presents a damning critique of patriarchal family and the generic role of woman as a wife and mother; the suffocating demands placed on woman, most often causing the death of their inner selves.

Desai could be seen as ahead of her contemporaries in renewing and re-energizing the words, syntax and transforming the banalities of everyday reality into the work of art. From her first novel to the last, one may discover the growth of her vision in the diversity of her contexts and subject matter. Desai's writings travel across and beyond her given environment, her mores, enter into those territories of experiences that open up infinite secret zones of reality and imagination.

Anita Desai focuses her novels upon the personal struggles of her Indian characters to cope with the problems of contemporary life. In this way, she manages to portray the cultural and social changes that her native country has undergone since the departure of the British. One of Desai's major themes is the relationships between family members, especially the emotional tribulations of women whose independence is suppressed by Indian society. Her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock,* concerns a woman who finds it impossible to assert her individuality; the theme of the despairing woman is also explored in Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Other novels explore life in urban India (*Voices in the City*), the clash between Eastern and Western cultures (*Bye-Bye, Blackbird*), and the differences between the generations (*Fire on the Mountain*). Desai was short listed for Britain's prestigious Booker Prize three times: in 1980, for *Clear Light of Day;* in 1984, for *In Custody;* and in 1999, for *Fasting, Feasting.*

Exile physical as well as psychological is also a prominent theme in Desai's writings. In *Baumgartner's Bombay,* Desai (whose father was Indian and mother was German) details the life of Hugo Baumgartner, a German Jew who flees Nazi Germany for India, where he "gradually drifts down through Indian society to settle, like sediment, somewhere near the bottom," wrote Rosemary Dinnage in the *New York Review of Books*. She added: "Baumgartner is a more thoroughly displaced person than Anglicised Indians, and more solitary, for Desai's Indian characters are still tied to family and community, however irksomely. She has drawn on her dual nationality to write on a subject new, I think, to English fiction the experience of Jewish refugees in India." Pearl K.

Bell made a similar statement. "Baumgartner is the loneliest, saddest, most severely dislocated of Desai's fictional creatures," Bell noted in the *New Republic*. However, he "is also a representative man, the German Jew to whom things happen, powerless to resist the evil wind that swept him like a vagrant weed from Berlin to India." Jean Sudrann, writing in the *Yale Review*, praised Desai's narrative skill "in making us feel the cumulative force of Hugo's alienation." At a reading at Northeastern University transcribed on *Northeastern University Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict* Web site, the novelist said of her protagonist: "You remarked about his being so passive a character. Yes, I did mean him to be an entirely passive character. For the whole idea was to show how history sweeps people up and, like a juggernaut, often crushes them under its wheels. I wanted to write about such a person."

Desai's descriptive powers have been acclaimed by several critics. In the *New Leader*, Betty Falkenberg called *Baumgartner's Bombay* "a mathematical problem set and solved in exquisite prose." Bell observed that "there is a Dickensian rush and tumble to her portrayals of the bazaars, the crowded streets, the packed houses of an Indian metropolis." In general, Desai's "novels are quite short, but they convey a sharply detailed sense of the tangled complexities of Indian society, and an intimate view of the tug and pull of Indian family life."

While noting Desai's mixed German-Indian ancestry, *Spectator* contributor Caroline Moore commended the author for the authentic Indian flavour of her works. "Westerners visiting India find themselves reeling under the outsider's sense of 'culture shock,' which is compounded more of shock than culture," the critic wrote. "To Anita Desai, of course, the culture is second nature. Yet that intimacy never becomes mere familiarity: her achievement is to keep the shock of genuine freshness, the eyes of the perpetual outsider." This particular engagement with India is evident in many of Desai's novels, as A. G. Mojtabai noted in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Desai is a writer of Bengali-German descent, who stands in a complicated but advantageous relation to India," said the reviewer. "Insiders rarely notice this much; outsiders cannot have this ease of reference." Mojtabai found that Desai is able to delineate characters, settings, and feelings intricately, yet economically, without extraneous detail or excessively populated scenes: "This author has no need of crowds. Properly observed, a roomful of people is crowd enough, and in the right hands as Anita Desai so amply illustrates *world* enough."

The complexities of outsiders facing Indian culture form the basis of Desai's 1995 novel *Journey to Ithaca.* The story revolves around an ex-hippie European couple who travel to India for quite different reasons, the husband to find enlightenment, the wife to enjoy a foreign experience. As the husband, Matteo, becomes involved with a spiritual guru known as the Mother, wife Sophie goes on a quest of her own: to find the guru's roots in an effort either to debunk or to understand her. Calling the work "a kind of love triangle set against the madness of extreme spiritual searching," *New York Times* reviewer Richard Bernstein said of *Journey to Ithaca* that "Desai writes with intelligence and power. She has a remarkable eye for substance, the things that give life its texture. Nothing escapes her power of observation, not the thickness of the drapes that blot out the light in a bourgeois Parisian home, or the enamel bowl in the office of an Indian doctor." Moore, in the *Spectator,* though commenting that the main characters are drawn rather sketchily, commended the book as "superbly powerful . . . emotionally and intellectually haunting, teasing and tugging our minds even through its imperfections."

Gabriele Annan, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement,* found other flaws in *Journey to Ithaca.* "This is a curiously inept book for a novelist of Desai's experience," Annan wrote. "The narrative is full of gaps and improbabilities, as well as clichés," and "the dialogue is stagey and unconvincing." *Wall Street Journal* contributor Brooke Allen, while admiring Desai's style of writing, also found much of the story unbelievable. Spiritually inclined readers may find the action plausible, but "others will remain incredulous," Allen asserted.

Fasting, Feasting, Desai's third novel to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize, "tells the apparently spare story of one Indian family and the varying fates of its two daughters and single son; it is only on the novel's final, quiet page that Desai's intricate structure becomes clear and the complexity of her emotional insight makes itself felt," explained Sylvia Brownrigg. Uma, the oldest daughter, is charged with the care of her demanding parents, while her sister, Aruna, is unhappily married but has escaped the responsibilities that hinder her older sister. Arun, the brother, is the focus of the second half of the novel. He is smothered by his parents' expectations of his life, and he eventually finds his way to Boston where he attends school, staying with an American family, the Pattons, during a break between semesters. "Arriving in the United States, Arun had exulted in his newfound anonymity: 'no past, no family . . . no country. 'But he has not escaped family after all, just stumbled into a plastic representation of it," commented J. M. Coetzee in the *New York Review of Books.* The Pattons, with their excesses, counter the values of the Indian household. "Arun himself, as he picks his way through a minefield of puzzling American customs, becomes a more sympathetic character, and his final act in the novel suggests both how far he has come and how much he has lost," explained a critic for *Publishers Weekly.*

Critics were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the novel. "*Fasting, Feasting* is a novel not of plot but of comparison," wrote Brownrigg. "In beautifully detailed prose Desai draws the foods and textures of an Indian small town and of an American suburb. In both, she suggests, family life is a complex mixture of generosity and meanness, license and restriction." Donna Seaman, writing in *Booklist,* commented: "Desai has been compared to Jane Austen, and, indeed, she is a deceptively gracious storyteller, writing like an embroiderer concealing a sword as she creates family microcosms that embody all the delusions and cruelties of society-at-large." Though Coetzee faulted Desai's America as feeling "as if it comes out of books," he lauded her writing, particularly her portraits of India. "Desai's strength as a writer has always been her eye for detail and her ear for the exact word . . . her gift for telling metaphor, and above all her feel for sun and sky, heat and dust, for the elemental reality of central India."

Desai is frequently praised by critics for her ability to capture the local colour of her country and the ways in which Eastern and Western cultures have blended together there, and for developing this skill further with each successive novel. A large part of this skill is due to her use of imagery, one of the most important devices in her novels. Because of this emphasis on imagery, she is referred to by reviewers such as *World Literature Today* contributor Madhusudan Prasad as an "imagist-novelist" whose use of imagery is "a remarkable quality of her craft that she has carefully maintained" in her mature novels. Employing this imagery to suggest rather than overtly explain her themes, Desai's stories sometimes appear deceptively simple; but, as Anthony Thwaite pointed out in the *New Republic*, "she is such a consummate artist that she is able to suggest, beyond the confines of the plot and the machinations of her characters, the immensities that lie beyond them, the immensities of India." In the London *Observer*, Salman Rushdie described Desai's fiction as being "illuminated by the author's perceptiveness, delicacy of language and sharp wit."

2

Sense of Isolation in Anita Desai

A psychological novel, also called psychological realism, is a work of prose fiction which places more than the usual amount of emphasis on interior characterisation, and on the motives, circumstances, and internal action which springs from, and develops, external action. The psychological novel is not content to state what happens but goes on to explain the motivation of this action. In this type of writing character and characterisation are more than usually important, and they often delve deeper into the mind of a character than novels of other genres.

The psychological novel can be called a novel of the "inner man," so to say. In some cases, the stream of consciousness technique, as well as interior monologues, may be employed to better illustrate the inner workings of the human mind at work. Flashbacks may also be featured. While these three textual techniques are also prevalent in "modernism," there is no deliberate effort to fragment the prose or compel the reader to interpret the text.

Novels written in and around 1960's portrays the inner conflict of characters in Desai. The new grounds Desai breaks in her depiction resonate with psychological realism. The musings of high strung Maya redolent with symbols of dreams and desire make us behold her past, the early childhood, adolescence and her present. The lyrical prose steers the readers to coordinate the various patterns in the novel and one may see through the vulnerable story telling self of Maya in consonance with her self-dramatizing persona.

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Desai's protagonist, Maya, in terms of Indian philosophical system means the creation of the world which is ultimately unreal. *Maya* is also denoted by the term *Prakriti* which constitutes the seed of the entire phenomenal world and which cannot be defined as real or unreal. "The very nature of *Maya* therefore is contradictory. As *Prakriti,* her fulfilment is in rooting, possessing, sprouting, creating as *Maya* however this phenomenon liberates and is liberating, volatile-free floating.

Maya of *Cry, the Peacock* however unlike her true nature can neither fulfil herself as *Prakriti* or liberate herself as *Maya* in a stifling relationship with Gautama. Desai's description of the unharnessed overwhelming longings and growing derangement of Maya turns out to be an innovative contribution to Indian literature at large. The novel drives home the elusive, obscure reasons of discord in man-woman relationship. The title draws us to the analogue between a peacock's cry in the wilderness seeking a companion with Maya's desperate agonised cries for making real genuine human contact, that remains thwarted. Usha Bande's view (1988: 59) that "There is no attempt on her part at self-analysis, to apprehend her demands" is not a correct assessment of Maya, nor are the varied observations of her "father fixation" or "frustrated libidinal instincts." On the other hand Desai gives Maya a distinct individuality, an intuitive moral awareness, sense of justice and a poetic imagination.

Married to Gautama in an oppressive relationship that continues to pester her with the complex of her inadequacy, her childishness inevitably puts strain on the fragile sensitive mind of Maya making her unsure of her sexual and personal identity. Penelope Mortimer's epigraph of her novel *Pumpkin Eater* (1962) describes Maya's situation: "Peter *Peter* pumpkineater/Had a wife he could not keep her/ He put her in a pumpkin shell/And there he kept her very well." Gautama, described as down to earth, stolid, rational lawyer however is dedicated to the public life and social concerns. The novel begins with the death of Toto, Maya's pet dog. Toto could be seen as a surrogate child to Maya. The narrative puts it: "Childless women do develop fanatic attachment to their pets, they say. It is no less a relationship than that of a woman and her child; no less worthy of reverence, and agonised remembrance" (Anita Desai 1963: 9).

Gautama fails to understand this attachment and promises to bring another dog for her. Gautama's advocate associate calls on him and he "rose immediately ordering tea to be sent to the study forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether" . Toto's death may be trivial for Gautama, possessed with a superior assumption of his busy professional life, but it matters to Maya's distraught state of mind:

> Showing how little he knew of my misery, or of how to comfort me. *But then, he knew nothing that concerned me, ...* telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me .... It is his hardness, no, no, not hardness but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, talking, reveal myself. It is that-my loneliness in this house.

A motherless child, Maya had been the centre of her father's affection, dependent on her father for the fulfilment of her emotional needs for love, understanding, compassion. In her adult relationship with Gautama, the gulf between the no-nonsense world of Gautama and Maya's urgencies for emotional attachment becomes visible. Maya laments in the opening pages: "A husband who did not give another thought to me, to either the soft willing body or lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed." Maya's longings are seen as reflective of immaturity and inability to cope with the realities of life. Gautama holds her father responsible:

> —for making you believe that all that is important in the world is to possess, possess-riches, comforts, posies, dollies, loyal retainers-all the luxuries of the fairy tales

> you were brought up on. *Life is a fairy tale to you still.* What have you learnt of the realities? The realities of common human existence, not love and romance, but living and dying and working, all that constitutes life for the ordinary man. You won't find it in your picture books. And that was all you were ever shown-picture books. . . . And here you are, capable of seeing nothing but delusions, imagining them to be real. How prettily you stroll in your garden dreaming of the fairies that sleep in the buds.

Gautama used to quoting the *Gita* profusely may be considered right from coolly rational chauvinistic point of view. His wit and wisdom discerns in Maya 'father fixation,' "this is the reason 'why you married me, a man so much older than yourself.'

The narrative does not reveal whether Maya's marriage was an arranged one or she was married according to her own choice. Gautama's observation could be seen as the usual complacent and self-aggrandizing view men take of themselves. In fact his observations however precise and witty they may sound, are intended to belittle and undermine Maya. As the novel gathers momentum, we infer it is Gautama who is genuinely against Maya's freedom. This apparently utterly conventional good and successful husband is known for his detachment and superiority, for his smug self-importance. Maya's fine sensitivity, tenderness of heart, her terrain of desires, love for nature remains grossly misunderstood. She muses:

> Grey, *grey*, all was grey for Gautama, who lived so narrowly, so shallowly. And I felt sorry, infinitely sorry for him, for this slow, harmless, guileless being who walked the fresh grass and did not know he touched it.

Hallucinations and delusions, sinister images flood her mind: lizards, snakes, the rats sucking their young, albinos. Fear of the unknown threatens her:

> Perish one must. The desert is waiting, the rats and the lizards. They'll claim the flesh, the winds will carry the

> bones away. Mind the wind. Shut the windows. Hide, *hide*.

The story moves around a prophecy made during Maya's childhood that in the fourth year of her marriage, either she or her husband would die. This episode has received ample attention of the critics. K.R.S. Iyengar while discussing the novel notices the ominous fatality in these words: "Over the whole narrative in *Cry, the Peacock,* which is really Maya's effort to tell her story to herself, to discover some meaning in her life, and even to justify herself to herself, over the whole narrative there hovers an uncannily oppressive sense of fatality."

Belief in fatalism, motivated by astrological predictions or by the fact that human life is subjected to mysterious, unresolved contingencies has been accepted a universal archetypal phenomenon. Maya's traditional Brahmin family believes in astrological matching before settling marriage:

> Born of a family of Brahmins that for generations... according to the prescribed patterns, had married according to the advice and suitability of their horoscopes, had diligently taken up careers that the pundits had chosen for them out of the constellations, had their children's stars studied and speculated upon.

The prophecy plays an important role in the married life of Maya who broods over it and is never able to forget it completely. As a small child her Ayah took Maya to an albino priest to cast her horoscope and he prophesied:

> My child, I would not speak of it if I saw it on your face alone. But look, *look* at the horoscope. Stars do not lie. And so it is best to warn you, prepare you .... Death ... to one of you. When you are married-and you shall be married young... Death-an early one-by unnatural causes ... the child must be persuaded, she must listen to my warning. It is my duty to prepare her, my duty...
>
> Four years after your marriage, so the stars prophesy, and the space between your eyes, the mark there,

> supports this prophecy. I have warned you, performed my duty. Be wary, child, be wary and fear God.

The child Maya carries the sharp memory of this sinister prophecy to her adulthood. Gothicised atmosphere of gloom and mystery envelope Maya's life signalling the disturbing return of the past upon present. Memory tortures her. After four years of her marriage she becomes obsessed with the prophecy: "and four years it was now, we had been married four years .... I knew the time had come. It was now to be either Gautama or I". The stream of consciousness clubbing the past with the present makes this scene figure in section I of Pt. II whereas Maya's act of pushing Gautama from rooftop, takes place at the end of Pt. II of the novel. Gautama's violent death has drawn varied critical perceptions. Jasbir Jain takes the view that "Maya pushes Gautama off the roof in order to protect her world of sensuous abundance."

Perhaps living un intruded in her secret world of make-believe makes her sense Gautama as an aloof and hostile enemy, therefore he must die, before he makes her die.

The more realistic observation makes us see through several factors: shortly after the pet dog Toto's death she receives a letter from her brother Arjun from America in which he makes a mention of the prophetic words of the priest, that Maya's mind has inexorably lodged. The shocking act of killing her husband could be seen as motivated by a hopelessness that the Maya-Gautama relationship spells-bearing the strain of his cold treatment during four years of marital life, the inconsolable emotional starvation, she suffers in her craving for love, for intimate contact. The growing desolation of her spirits is revealed in the frustration she keeps experiencing:

> lnging to be with him, be close to him ... make haste in undressing .... But when I went ... he had closed his eyes not with mere tiredness, but in profound, invulnerable sleep, and was very far from any world of mine, however enticing.

Besides marital incompatibility, another factor responsible for aggravating Maya's miseries is the attitude of her mother-in-law. A social worker, the mother-in-law is driven by popular social values. Maintaining appearance-visible public profile is her top priority. She does not permit Maya's dormant maternal potential any outlet. Maya seeks her time, her company to soothe her, but she is never available. The mother-in-law seems to have set the "order" of the family by treating with disdain the basic emotions of love, attachment, compassion, empathy and concern. Mother's "conditioning" has reduced the family incapable of simple joys of life; everything is cerebral and impersonal. In her portrayal one may sense the distortion of femininity by the patriarchal norms. The social-political world to which she belongs has made her internalise values considered significant in male-dominated culture. Political issues, national events preoccupied her milieu. Even to relax, a game of cards would be resorted to. Desai seems acutely aware of the polarised world of chauvinistic male culture separate from the world of women:

> In Gautama's family one did not speak of love, far less of affection. One spoke-they spoke-of discussions in parliament, of cases of bribery and corruption revealed in government, of news-paper editors accused of libel, and the trials that followed, of trade pacts made with countries across the seas, of political treaties with those across the mountains, of distant revolutions, of rice scarcity and grain harvests ... they had innumerable subjects to speak on, and they spoke incessantly. Sometimes, in order to relax, they played games of cards, so swiftly, so nervously, so intently, that they found they had to release the mounting pressure by conversing, and would begin to talk again, of political scandal and intellectual dissent.

The mother-in-law is drawn as possessed with immense energy, harnessed in social work, "like some busy rhinoceros charging through the forest, to her dispensary or her crèche, or her work-shop for the blind, the disabled, the unemployed."

She is energy incarnate but ironically it is not directed to the crying needs of Maya. Her austere life-style is demonstrated by her meagre meals and dull-coloured clothes, commenting on which Maya says: "In that dark room, I was the only one who wore a sari of bright colour. The rest wore colours that no one could care about." She may be matronly but is incapable of giving motherly love to Maya. She could command respect but not love:

> broad body that was so powerful with the richness and redness of the blood that flowed so abundantly in her. If she was a figure of old age, she was as much a figure of fire and energy. The gods might one day erect a monument to her, though human beings would not. She awed me, and attracted me at the same time. Were she to lift her hands into the sky, from those gnarled tips her blood would flow in generous streams towards those who needed it. I wondered if I was one of them.

The final moments of the narrative disclose subtly how a dominant mother's influence could mould the personality of the children. Any display of overt sentimentality submitting oneself to candid emotional ties was deemed symptomatic of inferior breeding. The family dreaded passion, "as wise-men dread their flesh." The mother could not even form a close bonding with her daughter, Nila. Both living in their private worlds dread lest their private thoughts spillover into the open. They even avoid physical contact, their body language reveals distance.

> They sat there, knee to knee, but scrupulously avoiding contact, in the semi-dark beyond the ring of lamp-light, two black figures in bowed postures, jointed by a thread of white that each held in her hands and worked at, silently, absorbedly. Neither spoke, they dreaded speech now that they were so close together, as though their thoughts and ideas, safe and controlled by each one within herself, would explode out of the bounds prescribed for them and spill into the open, were the two to meet and touch. They dreaded this as their son

> and brother had dreaded passion, as wise men dread their flesh.

It is easy to discern that the women like Maya's mother-in-law are merely agents of the male-dominated social processes. Maya's sister-in-law (husband's sister) and her mother-in-law visit her for a short period which proves invigorating for Maya simply because she does not have such company and for that short period she forgets her marital woes and her personal miseries. But the mother-in-law is too preoccupied with her busy schedule. She is more concerned with social welfare than with the welfare of her own daughter-in-law and, by implication, of her son. Maya entreats her to stay for a few days more. She earnestly needs her company: "If they stayed a while, they might help me, as my own father could not by teaching me Some of that marvellous indifference to everything that was not vital, immediate and present. I did not know how they could do this, but somehow it had to be done." Maya being motherless craves for maternal tenderness and emotional refuge in her mother-in-law: "and yet I yearned for her to hold me to her bosom. I could not remember my own mother at all." When Maya implores her to stay, she says "How can I, child?" she said, smiling and then frowning, "It is impossible." It is ironic that her own daughter's marriage is on the rocks and she is contemplating divorce for which she needs Gautama's professional help but he callously refuses to be of any help.

> What does she take me for, one of those two-rupee lawyers that squat under the banyan tree outside the courts.... I haven't time to waste on a case like hers the mess she makes by being too bossy and self-willed and bullying.

The novel touches several issues and most importantly childlessness, considered a social stigma. The portrayal of Maya is also a vehicle of critiquing the dogmatic norms of patriarchy. For infertility, it is always the woman who is blamed and not the man. Besides, the woman's inability to produce a son is also assumed to be a social stigma. The androcentric culture breeds in women the desire to beget male child. Porn goes to the temple with offering to the deity in the hope of getting a son. Mrs. Lal who has four daughters is pregnant again in the hope of getting a son. Reacting to Mrs. Lal's condition, Maya vehemently feels:

> I ought to have been able to rejoice at this, as my father had rejoiced in me, saying that in a daughter, he had treasure. Yet now the word brought up visions of dowries, of debts, humiliations to be suffered, and burdens so gross, so painful that the whole family suffered from them.

Maya's story encloses several other tales. Arjun, Maya's brother, has been a rebel since the very beginning and refuses to be taken as the son of Rai Sahib. He behaves against the expectations of his father and ultimately runs away to the U.S. to try his luck all on his own, as an unknown citizen, and the other is a teacher friend of Maya, Leila who teaches Persian in a Girls' College on a meagre salary nursing her petulant, temperamental, irritable, terminal tubercular husband.

The early part of the novel invokes a subtle comparison of Maya and Arjun in the bird imagery: "If I was a partridge, plump, content, he was a wild bird, a young hawk that could not be tamed, that fought for its liberty." Arjun obviously seeks his freedom being in a privileged position because of his gender: potentially too strong to be fettered by easy life and prosperous background, a person who would like to stand on his own.

The comparison is also suggestive of the marked difference in the upbringing of Maya and Arjun. The greater tenderness with which Maya was brought up made her dependent on others while the brother was made to depend on his own resources. The novel diagnoses the way in which concept of 'femininity' makes women subject to the power of the father and then of husband.

Another extremity of feminine oppression is manifest in Leila who, against the wishes of her parents, elopes with her lover who is a tubercular. She suffers his taunts and tantrums simply because he is her husband, however worthless he may be. She is a masochist, one who derived pleasure from her own pain and humiliation and "was one of those who require a cross, cannot walk without one." She is the real fatalist and she accepts it. She simply accepts her lot pointing her fingers towards the centre of her forehead, "It is all written in my fate long ago." Leila is one who resigns herself to fate without any remonstrance. Maya does not appreciate this downright surrender "had she raged, revolted, I should have rushed to her now."

Maya's perspectives present a range of characters to the readers and we perceive in Maya a sensitive human core. She is certainly not a passive, obsessed, arrested in childhood, child woman, she possesses a mind of her own, the potential to be a loving, caring independent woman. She like Laila, as she admits, would not surrender to her fate, but the relentless, continued aloofness of her husband and her confinement, straitjacketing has stripped her of a sense of self-worth and that brings about her deterioration and a recognition that life fails to offer her any solace:

> God now I was caught in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy, of release? ... Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying and I am in love with living. I am in love, and I am dying. God let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore-only death and waiting.

The volatile imaginings flash in Maya's hysterical mind an idea:

> The man Gautama had no contact with the world, or me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact. What would it matter to him.

Pushing Gautama from the rooftop is unleashing the volcanic content of her repressed psyche. But the act also destroys her. She suffers mental breakdown and regresses in the world of childhood at her father's home.

Voices in the City juxtaposes the city of Calcutta with the chart of Nirode's life. The novel, as the blurb suggests, invokes the din, the clamour, the mercenary indifferent nature of the city, its corrosive effects upon a family. Brought up in luxury by an over-indulgent mother, Nirode settles down in Calcutta and adopts a Bohemian life, while his elder sister, Monisha, leads a servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family. Their younger sister arrives from Bombay and becomes involved with an artist, but the outcome of this and the dreadful decision Monisha eventually takes, make this novel a doubly haunting and consummate work of art. Divided into four sections: 'Nirode,' 'Monisha,' 'Amla' and 'Mother,' the novel explores the lives of the artists: the failed artist Nirode, the would have been artist Monisha, the would be artist Amla and the artist established Dharma who has been able "to strike a balance between art and life. The novel nevertheless focuses on Nirode. The brother and two sisters are the product of a seemingly disintegrated family that their mother failed to hold together.

In their narrative movement between the past and the present, we discover their individual history. As adults in the city of Calcutta, they find themselves caught in the cross-currents of urban culture and its contradictions. The novel also draws in kaleidoscopic images the cultural transition of India in the 1950s a phase in which the older elements are not altogether dead, and the emergent ones not fully evolved. The narrative describes the fife of a feudal family of Kalimpong dominated by the mother, an inferior father who is most of the time drunk and four children, two sons and two daughters, Arun, Nirode, Monisha and Amla. With Arun's departure to England for higher studies begins the novel. We get to know of Nirode who works in a newspaper office as a clerk, not holding an important position. Monisha is married to Jiban, a middle-rung officer in a Government Department with a large joint family, a typical middle class family.

The younger sister Amla has received training as a commercial artist in Bombay and has come to Calcutta to Jom an advertisement firm. The death of the father renders mother lonely when all the children are outside Kalimpong: she seeks the ami-cable company of her neighbour, one retired Major Chaddha with whom, as her children assume, she was also having an affair. This relationship stirs deep resentment in Nirode. Nirode's hostility to his mother is manifest in not only refusing to read her letter but also employing filthy vituperatives against her, suspecting her of having several illicit relations. His anger never remains contained: "Raising himself on an elbow which shakes and trembles with the pressure of his shrunken body, he speaks with ferocity. Tell her to go to show up that old Major of hers, all share of banks or finance or insurance, and all the rest of her bleeding equipment."

Nirode's life has been a succession of failures in whatever he tried from bringing out a magazine called *Voice* to writing of a play: opening a book stall, and even selling spurious antique art pieces. He has had a close brush with death when he was critically ill but was hospitalised and nursed by Monisha. Amla has an infatuation with a married artist Dharma and through her we are shown the world of the upper class society. Monisha's ill-matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility, the stress of living in a joint family and an unresponsive husband push her to the breaking point and she commits suicide by self-immolation. The novel ends with the funeral of Monisha after the arrival of the mother from Kalimpong.

Desai's narrative employs the metaphors of European naturalism to project the seamy side of the under-privileged sections and to debunk the wide hiatus that exists between one class and the other, the hypocritical norms of class-consciousness. One may read in the plight of Nirode, Amla and Monisha the anxious quest of the artists for some meaning amidst the panorama of futility. Seema Jena puts it: "Since no metalled high way exists for the artist's journey, the writer has shown different wandering ways and tortuous lanes, the artists of various shades and temperaments take and the relation they have with the society."

The urban metropolitan consciousness comes into being in the voices of the three representatives of great Indian middle class. The urban circumstances and compulsions lock the characters in a closed world without promising release or a viable alternative. J.P. Tripathi's view attributes the depression of Nirode, Monisha's helplessness or Amla's predicament to the city of Calcutta: "a kill joy city ... has an intrinsically negative anarchistic genius demonstrating *'Cholbe na'* till the point of annihilation.". The urban life manifests itself through the newspaper and the institution of family. Newspaper is the most powerful component of establishment, not that it cannot be anti-establishment but in the context of the novel, it is pro-establishment. Before the emergence of electronic mass-media and even after that, the newspaper still remains the most powerful medium of moulding public opinion, hence a lot of industrial houses were taking over newspapers way back in the early 60s.

Desai comments on this through Nirode: "There are other more dangerous worlds: lies, hypocrisies, retract, communal, religion. ... Editors are born without eyes, without pupils or corneas or irises." In spite of his intellectual pretensions, and superciliousness, Nirode's dedication to his individual freedom is basically flawed because it has blocked all roads to genuine illumination; rendered him incapable of any human relationship. Whatever ideology he is holding on to, it has sapped and sopped his human core. Monisha, the quiet, fragile, sensitive, well-read woman knows it and she acknowledges it: "if I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is nothing I can give myself to, and so I must stay." Nirode's choice of non-conformism, the bohemian life style seems to have been imbibed from his attachment to the existential writers. He quotes Camus, and considers himself an outsider, "an outlawed hermit crab." The irony is that while in the western existential hero one finds a justification of *angst,* there is no valid justification for Nirode's cynicism and negative mind-set. He is charged with negative, destructive energy that precipitates the tragic termination of Monisha. Had he desired, he could have saved her. The narrative astutely describes:

> He had failed, obviously-but where was the will to get up, select another ladder, and begin the journey of absurdity all over again? He had never believed in the magazine so much as to be depressed by its sorry condition .... He was wearied by his own unsureness in which he swept back and forth like a long weed undulating under water, a weed that could live only in aqueous gloom, would never rise and sprout into clear daylight. He was proud to the point of being a fanatic, he was intense enough to be capable of whole-hearted dedication-yet he drifted, a shadowy cipher and his life consisted of one rejection following another. ... There was only this endless waiting, hollowed out by an intrinsic knowledge that there was nothing to wait for.

Nirode's objectiveless, unjustifiable anger eats his entrails, like an alcoholic who absorbs lots of unnourishing, false calories which ultimately eat away his intestine and liver. Nirode's visit to Jit and his wife makes him recoil with disgust for marriage:

> Marriage, bodies, touch and torture ... he shuddered and, walking swiftly was almost afraid of the dark of Calcutta, its warmth that clung to one.... All that was Jit's and Sarla's, he decided, and in-deed all that had to do with marriage, was destructive, .negative, decadent. He could waste no time on it. ... But strode on, not wasting time.

This loathing for marriage has its origin in the family life of the Rays that remains suppressed. Monisha interprets Nirode's and her own problematic contradictions. Afraid of involvement, both torment themselves in their aloneness:

> I discover in this unattached, drifting bird-creature that vital element that is missing from Nirode and myself-the element of love. And I discover that it is the absence of it that makes us, brother and sister, such abject rebels, such craven tragedians. In place of this love that suffuses the white face of this mystic waif, we possess a darker, fiercer element-fear. I see now that both Nirode and I shy from love, fear it as attachment, for 'from attachment arises longing.'

Unlike Nirode, Monisha's introspection lends her a deeper insight into her conditions. Her self-pity however disables her from taking a positive step to overcome her problems.

Nirode refuses to compromise with his individual choice even in the face of hardships. The reason for his leaving the petty clerkship in a newspaper is this that he did not want to do the insignificant job he was assigned. Men like him cannot be reduced to a mere cog in the huge machinery called community. If the novelist would not let the individuality of Nirode be corroded by collectivity, it is not to project him as an ideal hero, but to make us see through his muddled up, false sense of ego that prompts him to denounce every prospect of mitigating his abject condition. Amla's suggestion to ask mother for money who has pots of it, brings about bitter outburst:

> When do little girls get over their mother complexes? That's the worst of having a family-she just one of them, even the nicest, and in no time she's signalling to the rest of the clan to come and catch him, catch him and brand him with the family name, family money, family honour. I've given up using a family name, Amla, and I want no more of family life .... I'll tell you my ambition, Amla or, rather, what all my ambitions have come

> down to: to earn only as much as I need immediately, never so much as to spill into a bank.

The extremity of his cynicism is unleashed: "for meals-I scrounge off friends. It's amazing how many willing victims we parasites find ourselves. Society must have some kind of guilt complex about us after all. As for clothes, I haven't needed any for a long time now." In the very beginning of the novel, Nirode clearly says to Bose that he is very different from most of the people:

> You know, Bose, ... I've reached a point now-I always knew I would arrive at it one day when it would be impossible, physically impossible to work under any man, by his orders at a given time, at a meaningless job. I loathe those automatons at the top-I loathe their superciliousness, their arrogance, their *blindness*. How dare they be arrogant when working at such senseless jobs? Spend their lives, their entire energy and intelligence on some thing that does not matter? How can one? ... Better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live.

Nirode's rebellion, disenchantment, deliberate courting of miseries hardly lends any authentic courage and heroism to his persona, his masochism however vitiates the lives involved with him. The narrative resonates with contempt for him, in investing with him the imagery of a long weed, "he swept back and forth like a long weed undulating under water, a weed that could live only in aqueous gloom, would never rise and sprout into clear day light."

Monisha with all her sensitivity and intuitive intelligence figures as a ffagile character who never fights for her survival, could never make free choices. An introvert, she is capable of making genuine contact with her inner self and yet she withdraws herself into her own shell, secretly suffocates in the bustling and crowded, typical middle class joint family. The snail imagery describes the viscusness of her condition. Her diary discloses a situation fraught with difficulties:

> I'm glad to be occupied in cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing small children's hair. Only I wish I were given some tasks I could do alone, in privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nieces and nephews. Alone, I could work better, and I should feel more-whole. But less and less there is privacy. Even my own room, which they regarded at first as still bridal, now no longer is so (the tubes are blocked, it is no good), and sisters-in-law lie across four-poster, discussing my ovaries and theirs. Kalyani *Di* throws open my wardrobe in order to inspect my *Saris* . . . and sees-my books. The whole wardrobe full of books. To my perplexity, she laughs .... I see that ... there is nothing to laugh at in Kafka or Hopkins or Dostoyevsky or my Russian or French or Sanskrit dictionaries. But I wish that they would leave me alone, sometimes, to read.

This section of the novel not only portrays Monisha's shattered life as the typical daughter-in-law of the middle class Bengali family but also includes all middle-class and lower middle class married women invoking images of women behind the bars, who with least resistance surrender their individuality and identity to the roles cut out for them. Howsoever enlightened or well-read the daughter-in-law may be, as Monisha is, she has to mould herself into the persona of a respectable daughter-in-law meeting the expectations of the society. Monisha consequently looks at society with "disbelief' Virginia Woolf unleashes her anger at the stereotypes our culture promotes in the interest of patriarchy.

That makes inevitable the co-existence of double selves in a woman-one angelic-conforming to the patriarchal values, the other secretly seething with rage, resentment and frustration (Gorden 1984: 9). The image of the woman behind bars is a recurrent image that women writers from Bronte Sisters, Charlotte Perkin Gilman, Edith Wharton to Virginia Woolf employ to reveal the oppression of women. Desai's narrative reveals this:

> I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the *Bhagvad-Gita* and the *Ramayana,* in the dim light of sooty lamps. Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses in the old city. The eyes of these silent Bengali women are not dead, but they anticipate death, as they do everything, with resignation. There is no dignity in their death as in the death of that proud and glorious beast (tiger), but only a little melancholy as in the settling of a puff of dust upon the earth.

Nirode is unsettled by Monisha's "unprotected state of nerves." It makes him wary and off-hand as did his mother's attentions and Monisha's silent agony behind the barred windows of her house." It is through Nikhil, a schoolboy that the novel drives home the lack of space in a joint family:

> So many uncles in this house, so many aunts and cousins. Every one having guests and visitors, all coming and going. If I want to speak to them, my father says 'Go to your room and do your lessons.' If I go to my room and study, my mother comes and says 'why don't you come and pay your respects to them? I know nothing, then they complain I know nothing.' It is a bad system, this joint family, it makes it very hard for me to study and pass examinations.

Monisha is a nonentity in the joint family. Her husband cares little for her and when she removes money from his pocket to spend on Nirode's treatment without telling him, she is almost branded a thief. Jiban instead of accepting her right to money, questions: 'why did you not tell them at once?' He said, 'why didn't you tell me before you took it?' By suspecting her honesty, Jiban further alienates her.

The fragile romantic idealistic core of Monisha draws her perception of love from *Bhagvad* Gita, love without strings attached to it, a state which is too ideal to be realised in this selfish world:

> If only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience then but there is no such love. It is not there in my relationship with Jiban, which is filled only by loneliness 'and a desperate urge to succeed, and once plunged me into the most calamitous pleasures and pains, fears and regrets, and never again will it possess me. Nor is it there in my relationship with mother which is filled with an inbred and invalid sense of duty, of honour, of concern.

In none of the relationships she had: husband, mother, brother could she seek unfettered space. Each of these drew her ill symbiotic possessiveness that stifled her. Rabindra Nath Tagore could sense the reasons of dissonance in human relationship and his song offers an elegy to the sad end of several lives like Monisha's:

Why did the flower fade?

I clutched it to my heart

in excess of feelings and crushed it

Why did the lamp go out?

I shielded it with my cloak

And it got no air. (1936: 123)

She is like a tender sapling transplanted on to the soil and milieu that contrasted with the one for which it was meant, and her young life gets terminated in suicide.

Amla, along with Monisha, represents the diverse facets of feminine lives. Their relationship to Nirode provides the novelist the scope to probe deeper into his psychic labyrinths. She has been drawn as comparatively a down-to-earth personality though she shares with Nirode and Monisha some of the family traits. She comes to Calcutta from Bombay trained as a commercial artist to join an advertisement firm.

The typical reaction of middle-class society is expressed in comments she gets from no less a man than Nirode, a staunch opponent of commercial art, yet peddling fake antique pieces as genuine art and herein lies his hollowness and all his anger and indignation at society fall flat: "Commercial artist. Sounds too bloody awful for words. Poor old Amla, Do you really expect anything from a career stamped commercial?" These are the words coming from the same Nirode who has no hesitation in selling a fake bronze depicting:

> Shiva and Parvati locked together in an upright embrace that pulsed with so grand a desire, so rich a satisfaction that soon the girls, too, looked away from that inscrutable smile on Shiva's face and the taut buttocks of Parvati who had turned her back on the world as she pressed upon her consort her purpose and her delight, inexplicable to both the girls.

The statue was made by a dubious friend of Nirode "and buried underground for three weeks to give it the appearance of three centuries of age." She meets Dharma, an artist friend of Nirode who is a painter in his own right. His daughter has eloped with her cousin and in order to escape humiliation, he has left Calcutta and settled down in a suburb. Landscape is his main interest but association with Amla shifts his attention to portrait painting. Dharma seems to take interest in her not as a person, but as a model. Her young romantic disposition cannot help wondering how deep could he reach into her soul? Unless he knows the soul of the subject, how can he paint the portrait. Amla is initially attracted to Dharma but because of the opposition from Nirode and more so because of her own practical self, she realises that falling in love with a married man is of no consequence; it is a journey to a dead end. She withdraws herself from him. The infatuation dies down; she neither kills herself nor does she feel lost. For Dharma, Amla was not a living being, but merely a subject for painting: "He stared at her, but Amla knew instinctively it was not her face he was studying, but the collective face of society, the weak, amorphous, irresponsible face he hated so much."

The narration proceeds with the reference to the elopement of Dharma's fifteen-year old daughter with her first cousin, "my sister's son, a boy who I had brought up as her brother." The question that haunts Amla's mind is "What was it in society that he truly hated, the rules and restrictions that he verbally opposed, or their transgression that he secretly feared and loathed?" Dharma, like Nirode, although in a different context, denounces the institution of marriage. Talking of his marital relationship, when Amla asks about his wife's sympathy with him or the daughter, he says, "Our relationship is not all so straight-forward and pat, married relationships never are. There is the matter of loyalty, habit, complicity things I couldn't talk to you about till you married and knew for yourself."

Desai generalises diverse point of views to reveal alternative worldviews and also to dilute the nihilistic world of Nirode. The question of "choices" could also involve not surrendering to the dehumanising effect of metropolitan cities, there is still a way out, rather two ways out, one more easily intelligible and the other more mystifying, symbolic and esoteric.

The first being rather a bland solution that a happy, mature middle-aged Professor Bose would rather subscribe to in accordance with his age and maturity: "My dear Nirode ... one must make concession show else one can survive?" Nirode's problem draws us deep into his unconscious self-tracing secret suppressed cause of his self-loathing to his ambivalence to the city/mother/ woman-symbolic of the feminine principle. He is periodically flooded with the consciousness of his mother's feminine attraction: "still beautiful ... and her beauty compelled him to embrace her," "the stately and precise figure" "he could not take his eyes-off her, he watched her, petrified, as she came up with her exact and measured walk straight towards him." She is the one, who "stood out as a work of art in a crowded, stuffy gallery." Nirode reminisces that as a small boy "he fawned at her feet, almost grovelling over her long white toes, while she fastened her earrings and glanced with the same smile of pride from his little bowed back to her reflection in the mirror."

Nirode's relation in his growing years with his mother could not give him a sense of security that a highly sensitive boy needed. Trapped between a weak father and a disapproving, inconsistent self-centred mother, his sense of self-esteem and identity always remained threatened. The powerful, rich, beautiful mother writes poetic letters to her children. Her beauty and poetry however is soulless to her children with whom she could never connect in terms of nurturing and mothering. Nirode calls her she cannibal. Monisha refuses to rely on her in her distress. Nirode realised her power in draining him of "blood and passion." The mother is seen as an emasculating force.

The narrative of memories, in snatches and fragments, hints at the motivation that makes Nirode pursue the antithesis between spirit and flesh. Spirit eludes him and flesh repulses him. The image of his mother's sexuality that once attracted him now repulses him as an adult. Perhaps his disturbed childhood alienated him from a very basic relationship, that could have continued to sustain and nurture his adult life. The memory of not being owned by his mother, drives him to retaliate by not owning her or the city of Calcutta or even the very principle of feminine/maternity the Kali. If only he could transcend the dichotomy between sexuality and spirituality, he could see the city, the Mother Kali and his own mother merged as the emblem of creation and destruction. Nirode is doomed to be locked up forever in his adolescent rage never seeking maturity of vision.

Cry, the Peacock and *Voices in the City* illumine the recesses of human psyche. Family situation forms the principal scenario in the stories in an atmosphere of impending sense of doom. What comes to the fore from the two narratives is the antithesis between the male and the female worlds. Both indict the patriarchal norms that look down upon and condemn passionate nature in women, while poise, self-possession and composure are applauded as virtues. Maya is a tormented woman, her desolation and secret grief are not acceptable in social terms. Desai literally connects the narrative with the feminine body. *Cry, the Peacock,* Maya's narrative, disintellectualises the "notion of writing" by subtly undermining the most rarefied preoccupations of male writings: with Atman, Brahman or with other metaphysical abstractions as in Raja Rao. Monisha in *Voices in the City* writes the narrative of her disintegration holding the patriarchal authority culpable. Both she and Maya trapped in incompatible marital life are seen as unreliable, capricious in terms of the social norms.

Desai makes us see through the unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, traumatic cultural past, when unsuccessfully pushed out of consciousness, reach the realm of unconscious and communicate obliquely. Maya's and Monisha's narratives in two different ways embody what Mary Jacobus proposed in a woman writing-that works within 'male discourse' but works ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written.

3

The Novels of Motivation and Impasse

Love – Hate Relationship of Expatriates in Anita Desai's Bye, Bye Black Bird

In the present age, the novel has been developed by the rapid changes in social conditions. The novelists were interested in exploring the subconscious of human mind. During the last two centuries many writers followed the psychological theory of Freud and Jung. The novelist and storu writers such as S.K. Ghose, S.M. Mitra Raj, Lakshmi Devi, Kshetrpal Chakarbarty, A.Madhaviab, S.B. Benerjee, Sardar Jogendra Singh, BalKrishna, Sorabjee Cornetia, T. Ramakrishna, and K.S. Venketaramani were the writers who were experimenting to provide recognition to the Indo-Anglian fiction.

During the year 1950-70 the next batch of Indo-Anglians like RajaRao, R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahal, Anita Desai,Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgoankar, Shasthi Bratta,Nirad C. Choudhari and host of others are trying their art of fiction with unlimited and unrestricted theme. The novels of MulkRaj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya deal with the themes of social criticism and political emanicipation which are dedicated to India's quest for freedom from imperialism.

The ancient Indo-English fictions are based on the religious and mythical Indian tradition. It has been successfully presented in the novels of R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao and sudhin

Ghose. The psychological and social tensions are obvious in the novels of Anita Desai and Nayantata Sahgal.

Modern Indo-English fiction has now earned worldwide acclaim. It has produced recently a number of literary jewels of the world such as V.S.Naipal, Anita Desai, Jumpa Lahri, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Shobe de, Salman Rushdie and others. They all write on the same theme. The east and west encounter theme is obvious in the workds of Salman Rushdie. In the contemporary world of fiction, the writers dealt with the various upheavals crippling legacies of colonialism, migration, instances of discrimination and violence, encounters with cultural otherness can cause "inner expropriation of cultural identity".

Another Indian women novelist Arundhati Roy, the nightingale of India has given the world but one major fictional work, "The God of Small Things". Among these novelist Anita Desai is the greatest Indian Novelist, short story writer, and screen writer. Throughout her works, she focuses on personal struggle of anglicised, middle class women in contemporary India. As they attempt to overcome the social limitations imposed by tradition bound patriarchal culture.

Her characters feel alienated and exiled. Even if they stay in crowd, they never feel the lack of culture around them. Desai is more interested in the interior world of her protagonist than political and social realities. Her novels deal with ferocious assault of existence.

Desai uses several devices of stream conscious narrative like symbols and imagery. Desai engaged the complexities of modern Indian culture from a feministic perspective in her works while highlighting the female Indian predicament of maintaining self-identity as individual women. "Bye, Bye Black bird" is Anita Desai's third novel. Alienation at different levels forms the theme of the novel. It explores the lives of the outsiders seeking to forge a new identity in alien society. The novel has been said to be the novel of closest to her personal experience as immigrant. Anita Desai succeeds in her pattern when she shows a character in action. Her revelation of the unconscious threads of human mind gives the structural unity to the novel. She reveals the intense of longing of the exiled hero's emotion towards his native land. Adit comes to England and marries an English lady Sarah. Having a job and wife, he leads a happy life there. After some time Adit's friend Dev comes to England for higher education but he does not like the pomp and show of England. Like the other novels of Anita Desai, "Bye, Bye Blackbird" exhibit the living style of England.

England which changes Dev's Anglophobia extreme fear into an anglophile, he develops a great fascination for the English people. Adit on the other hand becomes nostalgic about his childhood memories and longs intensely for his native country India. Dev hated the ways of the English, now changes and begins to love England and desires to seek his future existence. Sarah is the only character who resigns all claims of being an English girl and submits fully to the wishes of her husband.

Desai's "Bye, Bye black bird" is mainly concerned with the varied human love-hate relationship. Adit from the beginning of the novel develops attachment to the western way of life, especially to England; but while living in England he shows his repulsion towards the way of European life and particularly of England. Dev comes to England only for his education. As a matter of fact Dev observes the basic distinction of social and educational factors between the east and the west. Dev becomes eager to be an England returned teacher at the same time shows his abhorrence hate to the social system of England. Adit tries to be judicious to the country he inhabits to the country and he exists for his future.

Dev shows his aversion dislike towards men and manners of England; but his stay there for a while intensifies his leanings to the country. Sarah stands for her reconciliatory approach between the east and west. She sacrifices her inhibitive leanings just for the sake of her husband. She outlines a proper and balanced approach to the various groups of human relationship. She proves her respectability as an Indian wife. Adit loves England; Dev loves India; but Sarah swings in between her natural inclination and willing adoption. She willingly resigns all her claims for existence in England and ready to leave England for India with her husband.

The breaking out of war between India and Pakistan once again creates yet another important structure as a whole. The war news makes Adit, nostalgic and awareness in him a desire to be in India. The love of his motherland shakes the hidden dormant sentiments. He decides to come back to his country immediately. There is wrestling inside his mind to leave England or not. Ultimately he listens to the call of his conscience by which he realises his social responsibility. He knows no more artificial life of England. He candidly confessed to Sarah. Sarah dedicates herself to her husband binds the different threads in the story. Though she has to face problem during the long journey from England to India because of her pregnancy she cherishes limping thought as a wife of Adit. She marries him with expectations to share the best of his mind and spirit; but she gives up her womanly desires and like a traditional Indian wife accepts her fate. She leaves her motherland for the sake of her husband and motherhood.

Dev, another protagonist of Desai's "Bye, Bye Blackbird" undergoes a convulsive change in his mind. He becomes an instance of contrast. Dev abominated Adit's mind and prepares himself fully to settle down in England for its luxurious life. Like Goroge Eliot, Desai also leaves her character to grow independently and watches the inner feelings. Author has made the diagnosis of the inner quivering in Adit and Dev for their respective change towards life. Finally, he realises his social obligations and return back home. He gives up all the pomp and show of a materialistic life. Dev also undergoes metamorphosis in his character and strike a comparison and contrast with Adit in existential pursuits. Thus there is a gradual psychic change in both the characters. The novelist simply justifies Adit's longing to come back to India due to Pakistan's attack; but the convulsive change through the war does not convince the reader immediately. Anita Desai herself watches a slow and gradual inhibitive sensibility in Adit. England as a living entity brings forth a slow change in the mind of each character. In his visit to the parental house of Sarah, Dev is attracted by its scenery and calmness. He gives up all his doubts and confusion for his future existence; he derives sensational excitement from all the objects seen in England. The scenes and situations become so enchanting that he realises:

> "Though every step or other paradisiacal walk in his mind as though to imprint it all on his mind as one memorises a poem".

The irony of the novel is that Adit, the Indian with comfortable job, English wife, fully feels at home in his adopted country. By the end of the novel Adit decides to leave England for good to India with his English wife, and Dev who has been critical of English and England, decides to stay back in England. The novel touches the racial problem and feeling in England. It is not simply white man's burden but also the feeling of superiority by virtue of their being rules over us.

Expatriation and the problems and complexities prevalent in the life of expatriates have merged as a major theme in the novels of 20th century authors, crossing the barriers of caste, creed and nationality. The authors have been articulate enough in narrating the complexities of life of immigrants. Another author in the series of Anita Desai, who dives deep in the unconscious and sub-conscious psyche of the expatriates and their nausea, nostalgia and longing ness to their native land. Her depiction of characters and situation is not one sided and her protagonists seem to be cherishing a strange love hate relationship with the end of their adoption with great precision brilliance. Adit weighing the merits and demerits of foreign land, but at the end of the novel he comes with a conclusion when his English self was receiving and fading and dying – that to achieve their real self and to have a "real life" he must go to India , his native place.

Desai feels that all these immigrants are prone to live or not live in England. Adit leaves England for good and Dev remains behind once. Adit's part of fascination for his foreign land to everything about London is fascinating and expresses unreservedly.

> "I love England I admire England I can appreciate her history and poetry as much any Englishmen".

He has moulded and transformed himself entirely up to the expectations of England. He has fully adopted the life style of Britishers. He keeps comparing England with his own native land criticise India for it's traditionally and backwardness. Truly his experience in India was not very pleasant and he portrays its heart-rending picture. When Dev felt disgusted to see a couple hugging each other under a lamp-post and remarked about the obscenity of these people as "a bunch of exhibitions'.

Adit is proud of his blind admiration of England. Love, admiration and loyalty have much offer to England, in return he feels to enjoy and celebrate. Ironically, in all his appraisal worship, land of liberty, individualism he realised that England can provide him neither of these whenever he goes, he becomes a victim of racial discrimination and constantly regarded as second grade citizen. His irresistible destiny gets on as long as his wishes to stay in England.

Despite his love and admiration for England, he feels himself as a lien and strangers at the moment his heart is full with nostalgic reveries of his native land. He longs for many things especially for food items in his home. Adit closed the circle of his migration complete from India to England and again to India. But Dev who came for studies criticised Britishers, laugh at Adit about his love for England. Though in the beginning he is fully determined, he would not stay in England. He appreciates only for England's green and grisly life. It was the beginning of his predicament. At the close of the novel he finds completely bewitched and charms for future perspectives of his life in England.

It can be easily evinced that "Bye, Bye black bird" depicts the love-hate relationship of the expatriates with England. In the novel Desai presents a clear reversal attitude of two expatriates. Adit who loves it leaves for good and decides to settle in India. Dev, who hate it, stays in London. Thus the fact is that Dev and Adit have love-hate relationship with ex-coloniers. In "Bye,Bye Blackbird", there is different effects on different characters. Adit, there is an eye-opener, realises him to return to his country. He completes the full circle; Dev begins a new one.

When Dev enters England he is shown that his state of mind is in an extreme end. He has ferocious hatred towards England because once England has powered motherland and ill-treated his countrymen. He shows hatred toward England and its people. He hated Indians who supports the western culture.

Desai digs out Dev deep rooted national feeling he imbibed by history of Indian freedom. He considers English men as his enemy. The extreme end of his state of mind is fully occupied with the spirit of his national feeling. The luxurious, happiness, privacy which everyone possess and enjoys English culture. Slowly changes and starts admiring the "once hatred" culture. In the end of the novel he decided to settle in England. It is another end of his state of mind. It is to be appreciable that the role of the novelist in bringing the psychic changes of the protagonists and their plight in an alien countries. She reveals that culture will change any person to follow it not out of compulsion of any external force but by changing the person's psyche to follow it voluntarily, whether it is eastern culture or western changes of the protagonists of Desai.

Anita Desai's works mark a new and mature phase in Indian English fiction. Anita Desai started writing in the sixties. The emergence of eminent women writers merged into the stream with their male contemporaries. The legacy of colonialism hangs heavily on the writers whose themes centered on socio-political and cultural issues results. Along with colonial and post colonial issues, the theme of women writers fore grounded the emotional in compatibility between partners in marriages and voiced the woman's need for space in a patriarchal society. Her early novels concentrate on the feminine sensibility at war with the hostility of male centered universe. Her later novels reveal the sensitive apprehension of existentialist against the modern man trapped in islands of loneliness, equally alienated from family and society.

A prominent theme running through her novels is the aloneness of the human being in the isolated island of human destiny. The burden of existence hands heavy on most of her characters. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar puts it, "is the exploration of sensibility the particular kind of modern sensibility that is ill at ease."

Desai usually used the theme of expatriation in most of her novels. Desai evokes the right atmosphere through the rich imagery characteristic of her style and the use of symbols. The psychological issue in her character's life affairs the dimensions of existential agony because it is rooted in the existential loneliness that corrodes her being and makes it possible for her to find meaning in an arid existence.

Expatriation of the individual is a persistent theme in Anita Desai's novels. The sensitive human being suffers from a sense of alienation who could reach the intensity of an existential malaise. Desai unfolds the existential traits of man in society. She analyses a man in action in order to reveal his hidden motives behind the reality of conscious mind. Her novel brings forth some bright prospect of her creativity. They leave an impression on the reader that Desai's arts moves from strength to strength, abounding in wit, humour and creative fecundity. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* touches issues of nationalism and cosmopolitanism and describes cultural and cross-cultural encounters in the lives of three major characters, namely Adit, his British wife, Sara and his newly arrived friend from Calcutta, Dev.

The following, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* reveals a woman's urge for autonomy. In retreating to the Manori's island, Sita returns to the feminine-semiotic landscape the security and comfort of the maternal womb. *Fire on the Mountain* makes 'fresh demands' on the readers, draws them to see the secret selves of the characters that remain repressed and unacknowledged in most feminine lives. In the stories of women struggling to cope with the sense of not belonging memories and dreams, the culminating scene of breaking out of fire on the mountains symbolises an act of angry subversion. The fire brings about an end to the world of make believe of Nanda, the total destruction of flora and fauna in the smouldering flames brings us to the awareness of 'impasse' that the sapped, desiccated lives are finally left with.

The poetic evocation of the milieu, the landscape and environs of London and rural England lend a sustained credibility to the narrative in *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. Adit having a flat, a middle-rung job in a travel agency and a white compatible wife, in the early part of the novel seems content with his fascination with the white cultural mores and Desai astutely describes his chauvinistic pride in acquiring a white bride.

"These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look very quiet and hardworking as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week" (Desai 1971: 29). The memories of home remind him of "Nothing ever goes right at home-there is famine or flood, there is draught or epidemic always". During his visits to India, "the laziness of the clerks, and the unpunctuality of the buses and trains, and the beggars and the flies and the stench and the boredom of it" disgust him.

The growing interaction with the English culture brings about disillusionment and he recognises a sense of uneasiness, difficult to handle in the city of London. Spurred by the Indo-Pak War of 1967, he decides to return back to India.

Visiting England makes the characters like Adit and Dev find themselves in closer confrontation with their host country in terms of coloniser-colonised relation as England and India have had a recent history of such relationship. Indian immigrants across different sections of society have varied experiences in England. The less sensitive ones coming under the category of "factory hands, colour no bar" do not bother about racial discrimination. They are very happy with their earning and their small world of Indian fraternity. It is the educated, refined and sensitive men like Adit and Dev who are troubled and offended by the overt discrimination of racism. The novel ends on a telling note. Dev goes to Waterloo Railway Station to see off the Sens and on his way back he catches a city bus and while:

> buying his ticket he felt certain and then not so certain that he saw a glint of scorn in the conductor's eye, the abrupt way in which he handed him his ticket and then kept him waiting for his change. He wondered if the old lady beside whom he sat down did not clutch her handbag and lean away from him as though she suspected a smell.

Sarah, the British wife of Adit Sen, figures as a character struggling against a set of very difficult circumstances. Dev and Adit encounter situations of racial discrimination but Sarah's estrangement is much more intricate. By marrying a non-white, she has broken the social code, and all the more so having married to an Indian, one from the country which was once a British colony. The narrative gives the hints of disparaging attitude of the English to Adit and Indians in general. Sarah is mocked, taunted and ridiculed by her colleagues and even small children studying in the school where she is a clerk. The portraits of exile, identity crises and loneliness, are drawn from Desai's personal experience. She says in an interview, "Of all my novels it is most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation ... the closest of all my books to actuality-practically every thing in it is drawn directly from my experience of living with Indian immigrants in London." (Ram 1977: 221) She also admits that this is "the only book I've written that is truly about the objective world, objectively observed characters hence the lightness of it." *(ibid.)* Desai's visits and stay in England and other European countries, her sense of history make her keenly aware of a variety of immigrant experiences.

A white woman's marriage to a brown/black Indian in the 1960s and 70s indeed has been an act of courage, but the subsequent sense of rejection is brought about because she allows others to control her identity and does not muster the emotional resilience to fight back or assert her independence. Her easy susceptibility reduces her to a "victim" position. She could not realise that nobody could "make you feel inferior without your consent." Desai describes her intense quick-ranging self-doubt:

> Who was she Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade *sari* one burning, bronsed day in September, or Mrs. Sen, the Head's Secretary, who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency? Both these creatures were frauds, each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it. When she briskly dealt with letters and bills in her room under the stairs, she felt an imposter, but, equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her fingers to the Sitar Music on Adit's records or ground spices for a curry she did not care to eat. She had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the morning at the school and one in the evening at home, that she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. They were roles and when she was not playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her

> body only a costume. Where was Sarah? ... She wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then she wondered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step off the stage, leave the theatre and enter the real world-whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth.

Even school children have guts to taunt her, "hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry" simply because she had married an Indian and this is perverted social value that causes the individual's dilemma in society:

"As she darted through their throng, they pretended not to notice her at all but, once she was across the road, she heard them scream, "hurry, hurry, Mrs. Scurry!" and "where's the fire, pussy cat?" Sarah is not only apologetic, she avoids any personal question from her colleagues "breathing hard at having so narrowly escaped having to answer personal question. It would have wrecked her for the whole day to have to discuss Adit with Julia, with Miss Pimm." But in spite of her avoidance and interactions she cannot help overhearing "Julia Sniff, as she left the room, 'If she's that ashamed of having an Indian husband, why did she go 'and marry him'?"

The narrative closes before Sarah reaches India. She sails to India where her first baby is to come. Unlike the Manichean white England India's polycentric, liberalism makes her easily accepted by Adit's family in Calcutta. Adit Sen finds in her some characteristics of Bengali, "You are like a Bengali girl." He tells her, 'Bengali women are like that reserved, quiet. Maybe you were one in your previous life." Adit tells Dev how he would be enjoying his holiday in Calcutta, "When I have a whole month of leave, saved up, I'll go. My mother will cook *hilsa* fish wrapped in banana leaves for me. My sister will dress Sarah in Sarees and gold ornaments. I'll lie in bed till ten every morning and sit up half the night listening to the Shehnai and Sitar." Sarah must wear the wedding present sent to her by Adit's family on their wedding anniversary:

> And he chose for her a *Sari* that his sisters had once sent her ... and the gold necklace ... sent by his mother as a wedding present.

It was the one hrs mother used to wear during the festive Puja season.

She must now say good-bye to her past twenty-four years:

> She felt all the pangs of saying good bye to her past twenty-four years. Yet it would be a great relief, for she'd be delivered from the tension of charade, the double role that she had to play in England, and ultimately, whether for good or bad, "she would be allowed to step off the stage."

Desai's keen analysis aptly captures the moments of ambivalence that constitute immigrant attitudes. The routinised display of racism has hardened Adit and he has learned to live with the fact of his racial inferiority, accustomed to being called a wog while Dev in private moments unleashes, "disconcerted, swung around to catch Adit's reaction, to catch a cue for his own, but Adit turned carelessly aside and pointed out something in a show window to Sarah, his shoulders in an elaborately non halant slope." Adit simply ignores these remarks and advises the same to Dev: "It is best to ignore those who don't deserve one's notice," Adit said, "in the care-paced voice of one who has learnt it as a lesson." Adit's resilience however gets under strain:

> Why had this happened? Mrs. Roscommon-James (his mother-in-law) had scolded him before, had shot maddening looks of pity at Sarah before. His arguments with Dev had been nothing new either, mere repetitions of things they had often said before, out of a sense of duty rather than antagonism. He could not tell himself. "My mother-in-law hates and despises me. Dev makes fun of the life I lead and the ideals I profess. Therefore I am angry. I am hurt." It was nothing so precise and definable. This was not the sole or even the main reason

> for his mood. This mood had begun to enter him, circulate within him and alter him during the drive out of London, through the Hampshire fields; had accompanied him through the dismal dinner and the night when Sarah had shut him out with a bang and a snap, from her childhood of one-eared pandas and large jigsaw puzzles ... but moods of anxiety and abstract pain were new to him. Faced with one, he was unable to deal with it—he merely stood still and felt his leaden feet sink in as though in quicksands.

Adit had been an anglophile earlier but gradually the phoniness of his whole situation descends upon him. He too, like Sarah, questions is real identity and can no 'longer contain stress: "His whole personality seemed to her to have cracked apart into an unbearable number of disjointed pieces, rattling together noisily and disharmoniously." He tells Sarah: "Our lives here they've been so unreal, don't you feel it? Little India in London. All our records and lamb curries and sing-songs, it's all so unreal. It has no reality at all, we just pretend all the time.... I've loved England more than you, I've often felt myself half English, but it was only a pretence, Sally. Now it has to be the real thing. I must go."

The firebrand, bitter, critical and at times cynical Dev who feels himself in no way inferior to the British intellectually, by the end of the novel, is tamed and all his outrage and criticism peters out.

> Somewhere, at some point that summer, England's green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and clutched at Dev instead. England had let Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with him or realised that he had done with her, and caught and enmeshed his friend Dev. It was as though this were an arbitrary act of England's, an abstract law to which Adit and Dev had quite unwittingly succumbed.

The experiences of "exile," not belonging or being disowned, in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* impact Sarah more seriously than Dev and Adit who in their diasporic situation present in variation the common expatriate experiences. Sarah had not visualised before that she was choosing her isolation deliberately by marrying a foreigner that rendered her exile in her own land. Sarah's loneliness is not easy to penetrate. The causes could be multiple, not unequivocably communicated in the novel, but as a reader, one senses what it means to survive as a sensitive human being in a culture which values eurocentric norms of class, gender and race. As a woman, she is vulnerable in her chauvinistic white cultural mores, her marriage to Adit has made her doubly susceptible to social prejudice.

In Sarah's musings we discern nostalgic anxiety of a divided self:

> She had shed her name as she had shed her ancestry and identity, and she sat there, staring, as thought she watched them disappear. Or could only someone who knew her, knew of her background and her marriage, imagine this? Would a stranger have seen in her a lost maiden in search of her name.

She avoided talking about her personal matters or any reference to her husband: "to discuss her Indian husband, would have forced her to parade like an impostor, to make claims to a life, an identity that she did not herself feel to be her own." In London she wants to remain inconspicuous avoiding any manifestation of the fact of being married to an Indian, even while shopping for grocery, she would avoid a shop on Laurel Lane where the proprietor knows of her Indian husband, hence, she would go to the supermarket:

> She loved the supermarket... The supermarket was a soothing place to her. Here she could buy her Patna rice and her pickles without acquiring the distinct personality these purchases would have marked her with, had she shopped them in one of those pleasant little shops at the end of Laurel Lane.... But inside the sparkling halls of the supermarket where walls of soap and cornflakes, hid her from strangers' eyes, she could

> be as eccentric, as individual as she pleased without being noticed by even a mouse. She walked out into the soft, muzzling rain with her packages, reassured to find herself an unidentifiable, unnoticed and therefore free person again.

Dev reminds-us of Nirode in *Voices in the City* except that, unlike Nirode, Dev adjusts himself and becomes one of the many Indian immigrants in London, who in spite of fretting and complaining hold on to immigrant status because of the mercenary interest His dystopic wishful thinking borne out of helplessness is rather naive: "Let history turn the tables now. Let the Indian traders come to England. Let them take over the city.... Let all British women take to the graceful *sari* and all British men to the noble *dhoti.*"

Anita Desai's fourth novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) describes Sita's "rite of passage" but with a difference. The story moves around a family which consists of Raman, his wife Sita and four children and the fifth child which is yet to be born, still plays an important role in the story. The fifth pregnancy of Sita brings about the events in retrospection and also links the present with the past. Like many of her other heroines, Sita's unusual childhood plays an important role in shaping her personality. During the winters of 1947, Sita, then a young girl, lived in Manori island, where her father was supposed to be a legend. A freedom fighter and social worker, he was too busy to look after his children. She had had an insecure motherless deprived childhood, and yet she had enjoyed the flora and fauna of the island. After the death of her father, she was married to Raman, the son of her father's friend Deedar. Deedar had arranged this marriage more out of pity than for love. Raman is an ordinary man, financially well off, running a factory but he is too commonplace to meet the expectations of Sita. Initially Sita lives in Raman's joint family which is willing to "accept even such an outrageous outsider" like Sita. But because of Sita's haughty, supercilious, unadjusting nature, Raman decide to live separately with his family in a flat. He tries to make Sita happy but she is hard to please and she is always seething with anger, discontent, and apathy. When Sita becomes pregnant for the fifth time, it is an ordeal for her, and she does not want to deliver the child.

Manori island seems to her the enchanted island of miracles and against the sane advice of Raman, she decides to go there, along with her two children Menaka and Karan during her advanced stage of pregnancy. On the island she expects for a miracle that never comes about. Her retreat to the island is symbolic of her regression to childhood. Here she renews contact with her past, fantasizing over her childhood and her father who was a god to the illiterate islanders. The children get annoyed and fed up with the primitive life on the island, Menaka asks her father to take them back to Bombay. Raman comes and takes the family away though Sita too goes telling herself: "Life had no periods, no stretches. If simply swirled around muddling and confusing; leading nowhere" (Desai, 1975: 155).

B. Ramachandra Rao reads the novel as a dramatisation of "the conflict between two irreconcilable temperaments, of two diametrically opposed attitudes towards life. The tragedy in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* arises out of the inability of the characters to connect the prose and the passion in their lives. They have lived only in fragments. The novel ends with a defeated and despondent Sita unable to rediscover the passion of life and deciding to accept the prose of life." Rao's opinion dogmatically endorses a patriarchal view of labelling Sita's condition in terms of "prose and passions." Naik however probes deeper:

> *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) marks a return to the autonomous world of inner reality. Sita, the main character here, appears to be a less morbid than Maya after four children. The cruelty and callousness of urban life stifle her and when she is with child again, she panics at the thought of bringing a new, fragile being

> into this harsh world and runs away to a small island, which has childhood association for her; but finally allows her husband to persuade her to return. The novel is tightly structured and the is-land is an evocative symbol of a lost paradise, but Sita's sudden capitulation at the end comes as an anticlimax. (1987: 242)

The return of Sita from unfettered but lost, illusory fanciful world to the appallingly mundane routinised rut in Bombay could by no stretch of imagination be seen as a journey from subnormalcy to normalcy. The novel invokes a sense of lost time: "All the yesterdays pass into nothingness." A sense of passing time, of experiences and people invest a sense of grim desolation to Sita's narrative. The tone suggesting the appalling power of time has been set at the beginning:

> a waste of ashes she saw, the cold remains of the bonfire her father had lit here to blaze. Ashes, white and waste. Dust lay as casually as sound on a beach, spider-webs spanned the corners of the unfurnished rooms like skeletal palm leaves. The odour was of bats and mildew, and silence boomed like the silence of undersea caves. It had no air of providing shelter from the sea or beach it was as much a natural part of Them as an abandoned shell or lump of twisted driftwood.

Jasbir Jain sees a polarised world in the novel and endeavours to come to terms with Sita's situation:

> There is a Rousseaustic opposition between the world of island and the city, but this opposition is not allowed to remain unquestioned. The contrast is underlined, the different worlds are demarcated, and the focus shifted from outside to inside, from the surroundings to human relationships and from the collective to the general. Sita is perhaps, at heart, an islander.

Her deep obsession with nature is the novelist's way of contrasting the urban, artificial with the natural world but this apparent contrast is intersected with heavy irony. The island however in Sita's retrospection is no longer an innocence suggesting Prospero's island in *The Tempest.* It begins to ingrain many more ironic connotations. Sita would want this to be her sanctum sanctorum, she would like to be a part of this world, the daughter of the mother earth, *Prakriti Putri* protected from the dubious, vicious world but the contact with the ambiguities of her relation with the past, "the other side" of story, the half-truths expanding into uneasy facts make the nature of her journey loaded with irony. As readers we discern a perennial shadow of loneliness afflicting her since the times of her drifting, derelict childhood to being a misfit in her adulthood.

Sita represents the rebellion against the vegetable existence of women in Raman's family. Her return, therefore, is not her acceptance nor does it show 'growth, ripeness; it is rather a sad compromise with the harsh facts of life which offers no alternatives to conventional feminine existence. While the novel echoes Katherine Anne Porter's long short story "The Cracked Looking Glass," we may sense a strong presence of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in the novel. The novel reverberates with metaphors of birds. As in *Cry, the Peacock,* Sita sees herself as a wounded eagle. The bird image makes us see her as a trapped eagle whose wings are clipped. She is also compared with the foreign tourist with whom she identifies because like her she is so vulnerable. Her journey into Manari island is a spiritual rite of passage—passage into the past in retrospection now she can make sense of her past with keener insight and maturity. This sojourn-hibernation, despite being ephemeral and short lived, gives her the incentive to "go on" in the process of living; let tomorrow pass into yesterdays. In the memory-narrative, Sita reminisces, when she is told that her mother had run away to Benares, she refuses to believe it and wonders, "Ran away? And left us? ... Your stories, Jiban," she shouted. "What stories you tell?" with the initial shock and bewilderment as to 'why had she left her husband whom they called a second Gandhi?" It is painful for her to accept reality:

> Sita preferred to accept that. Mother alive and well in a place no further than Benares would have been an idea she could not cope with, used to being without one. Life seemed complete, full, without her, there was no reason for her to exist. Sita had imagined she came into this world motherless and the world was crowded enough.... She belonged, if to anyone, to this whole society that existed at that particular point in history like a lamb does to its flock and saw no reason why she should belong to one family alone. As she was not sent to school, she only came in contact with other families like her own and life seemed normal. She could not remember wanting or waiting for her mother.

Brought up by her father, he would be too busy, either in jailor going underground or busy in meetings. Drifting and derelict, volatile child would collect discarded garlands and played with the tinsel till she fell asleep against a bolster and was carried away to someone's house to sleep always a different someone, it scarcely mattered which one. Even though she did not miss her mother as a child, she was deprived of her father's soothing presence.

Sita's awe of her father's persona recollected in the roles of a saviour, patriot, healer, magician, and social emancipator imbues his character with mystique.

In rapidly shifting focus, the narrative presents his relation with his stepdaughter Rekha ambiguously, hinting at his incestual inclination. The apparent attachment between the two would give away hints of physical intimacy, surreptitious meeting of eyes make Sita jealous of Rekha specially after Jiban tells her that Rekha is her step-sister and, there is no physical similarity between them. This knowledge agitates her:

> but his words had dropped on her skin like acid and she felt them burn whenever she caught an exchange of that heavy-lidded look between father and the daughter, or his arms in its fine white sleeve lie fondlingly across her round shoulders.

Like the mysterious story of her mother's disappearance, relationship between Rekha and her father in retrospection no longer remains a mystery. The adult Sita reaches an awareness of the past. The authorial comment illumines Sita's lonely adolescence:

> It was one more relationship that had to remain shrouded, a ghost in her life, because of the impossibility of talk between her and her father.... She told herself she could never approach him to ask of such private and, somehow, secret matters. As an adult, later, she asked herself, had there been no opportunity ever of talking alone to him? Ah! She remembered, with an instinctive shrinking from the shock and the pain, a few strange moments, still unexplained... There had been other occasions a few... but she shrank away from them, shutting them away in the dark. They had all been wordless and agitated by the queerest, the most horrible sensations. Only once she had come close, very close, to asking.

A many-faceted man, he is also a charlatan giving glittering drugs to the villagers by mixing gold and precious stones.

We are not sure about his motive. Once when Deedar, his friend who would later become Sita's father-in-law, asked about this hoax, he says it is a matter of faith. He puts a rational question, "You studied Chemistry at school with me! Don't tell me you believe pearls and gold have therapeutic value?" He replies:

> "No," came the soft, bubbling reply.... "No student of Chemistry can believe that. Anyone who has seen as much of life as I have, can't believe that. But what have these islanders seen? Nothing.... *Their* faith has never been shaken. And do you deny the therapeutic value of faith? They believe gold is the best thing on earth-best because most valuable. So why not add a little to these powders ... They believe it does them good and then it really does.

He is treated like a demigod by the islanders during his life time and even after his death, as shown in the last pages of the novel through the mouth of minor characters like Moses and Jamila who serve like the Chorus in the novel, like the rustics in Hardy's novels. In Jamila's eyes Sita does not have even an iota of her father's grand personality as Jamila says: "Not like him... She-she looks plain. A plain woman. No body.

Not like her father. That was a man,' she smacked her lips appreciatively." She broods over him and even as a child she had an ambivalent attitude towards him. There was no communication between them and so no human relationship. As a child she had observed him surrounded by his *chelas* and venerated by women prostrating themselves at his feet. We do not know whether the islanders were cured by coincidence or by their faith in him. Sita herself found as a child that, whatever the villagers attributed to father was not true, for example, the well that was dug on the island was declared to have sweet water by the islanders, whereas Sita found it hard water. In some respect Sita's father reminds us of Gautama's mother in *Cry, the Peacock* who could be put on a pedestal and worshipped but there could be no possibility of human intimacy with her: "The gods might one day erect a monument to her, though human beings would not."

Sita would like to be eternally housed in her childhood that even in her childhood was a distant dream. Conjugal relation in adult life, therefore to her is distasteful: "They are nothing—nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals." When Raman says, "I thought you liked animals," she bursts out: "My pet animals or wild animals in the forest, yes. But these are neither: they are like pariahs you see in the streets, hanging about drains and dustbins, waiting to pounce and kill and eat." The loathing for violent physical contact peeps through these highly suggestive outbursts. It is ironical that she is tender to animals, even pathologically tender, is tender to animals, even pathologically tender, but she has no tenderness or affection towards her children, husband and her in-laws. And even then, she feels that she is betrayed by her children and husband. An example of her pathological tenderness can be seen in the episode of the wounded eagle being killed by the crows. Menaka's trampling on tender buds or tearing off the paintings that she did not like get on Sita's nerves. She wants her family members to share her perception of life and when they do not, she feels let down. Menaka's character is a clear contrast to hers. She finds her mother theatrical and insufferable, for she is a practical girl who finds no charm in the island with its dirt and poverty. Sita's hypersensitivity makes her a psychological case, for she cannot stand 'the humdrum life of the usual noises and quarrels natural among children. She cannot even read the news-paper which abounds in news of violence, destruction and death:

> her husband casually handed her the newspaper on his way out to office. They all hammered at her with cruel fists-the fallen blocks the torn watercolours, the headlines about the war in Vietnam, the photograph of a woman weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail; articles about the perfidy of Pakistan ... they were hand-grenades all, hurled at her frail goldfish bowl belly and instinctively she laid her hands over it, feeling the child there play like some soft-fleshed fish in a bowl of warm sea-water... frightened, certain now that civilisation had been created by the godlike efforts of the few, in the, face of a constant, timeless war of destruction that had begun with time and was now roaring around her, battering her and her fish-foetus so that survival seemed hopeless. How could civilisation survive, how could the child? How could she hold them whole and pure and unimpeached in the midst of this bloodshed? They would surely be wounded, fall and die.

Raman's advice to her is sane and sensible: "But you're not leaving for such small incidents, Sita? They occur in everyone's life, all the time. If you are an adult, you know how to cope with them, they are only *small* incidents."

Most stereotypical concept of femininity and maternity is subjected to revision in Sita's story. "She hated the sight of their red faces, dripping, their chopped hair, sticking in clumps with sweat." But the phenomenon of birth is an act of creation and also an act of mystery. The poem whose line she has been trying to remember for long also suggests it. It is a poem by D.H. Lawrence which along with other things suggests the secrecy of the act of giving birth, especially the last three lines:

> Nay, even the slumbrous egg as it labours under the
> shell Patiently to divide and sub-divide,
>
> Asks to be hidden, and wishes nothing to tell.

Numerous critics have chosen to see Sita from Raman's point of view. They perceive Raman as a stolid, rational man, earning his livelihood, trying to discharge his duties to the best of his ability, but looks down upon Sita and perceives her as a muddled up philosopher, supercilious, unsociable, mentally living in the world of past, escaping from her duty both as mother and as wife. Neither attached to her husband nor to her children she fails to play her social role of wife and mother. The novelist however in her depiction exposes another face of feminine de-sire, without being judgemental about it. The in-depth analysis of Sita's growth explains why she refuses to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. Obviously Sita represents the category of men and women with whom Desai empathises, whose hearts cry out 'the great No,' who fight the currents and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them." The rejection of the given roles constitutes the mystique of Desai's women, "She had cried out her great "No," but now the time had come for her epitaph to be written."

Fire on the Mountain, awarded the Sahitya Akademi and also the Royal Society Award, brought Desai into limelight.

The novel reveals a new type of aesthetic evolution in Desai's art. Darshan Singh Maini plays a noteworthy compliment to the novelist in these words: "I trust this is probably Anita Desai's nearest brush with the Jamesian nouvelle, a form which the Master (Henry James) adored for its blessed deep breathing economy".

Nanda Kaul, the widow of a Vice-Chancellor, is compelled both by choice and circumstances to live in a secluded old bungalow 'Carignano' in Kasauli, fiercely guarding her seclusion and privacy. But her insulated self-consciously impervious life is disturbed by the arrival of her great-granddaughter Raka, a girl of seven or eight years, introvelt, sensitive and, like Nanda, very much confined to her own self: resenting any intimacy with her *Nani,* Nanda. She busies herself rambling through deselted locale of hills and gorges. It is the nature's expanse of desolation that draws her:

> It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her: the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks and agaves growing out of the dust and rubble, the skeletal pines that rattled in the wind, the wind-levelled hill-tops and the seared remains of the safe, cosy, civilised world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment. (Desai 1977: 91)

She is specially attracted towards a burnt house and is preoccupied with the idea of a forest fire. A childhood friend of Nanda, Ila Das, a Welfare Officer, dedicated to social reforms has fallen on bad days. She comes for tea with Nanda one afternoon. They have long chat about their early days, her experiences as a social worker and also Nanda's life as the Vice-Chancellor's wife.

On her way back when it was getting dark, near the village Preet Singh, an old man, angered by Ila Das's opposition to the child marriage, waited for her in ambush and brutally assaulted, raped and killed her: "Crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken still and finished. Now it was dark". This is the punishment brought up by the androcentric social norms which see Ila as the transgressor of the existing social order the child marriage. Cixous rightly recalls history in her comment that women who are seen as the threat to the male system "are decapitated, their tongues are cut off ... a woman who disturbs is nothing but disturbance". Ila's voice challenges, disturbs, amuses and irritates the dominant culture. It is only through violence that she could be silenced. Nanda gets a phone call about the outrage by the Police Inspector. She is shaken by the shocking news of her friend's violent rape and death. She is in a state of collapse when Raka announces that she has set the forest on fire.

Much more than Nanda Kaul's choice of seclusion, what seems most intriguing in the novel is the portrayal of Raka as a recluse. It is obviously in Raka that the novel excavates the roots of several psychological disorders afflicting women. Raka's interiority therefore needs to be visualised with greater sensitivity. Desai gives us the subtle suggestions:

> If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice, she was borne to it, simply.

Though Raka has not been through a "long route of rejection and sacrifice," unlike her grandmother, she has nonetheless been a witness to the abject degradation of her mother:

> Somewhere behind them, behind it all, has her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse-harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattresses in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept.

Raka, like an animal chased, would flee these scenes, sobbing, "Hate them-Hate them." Nanda Kaul secretly suffered the betrayal and infidelities of her husband. The psychology of perennial victimhood afflicted her consciousness to the extent that she developed apathy and detachment even to her own children. To her, the mountains, wilderness, flora and fauna of Kasauli serve as the substitute of human society. To both Nanda and Raka the landscape offers a refuge. Nanda hopes for tranquillity—liberty from the history of pain that she had had. She would not allow the past grief of her life to surface and yet the wounds, the bruises remain dormant, not receptive to healing as Emily Dickinson says:

They never did assuage;
Time never did assuage,
An actual suffering strengthens,
As sinews do, with age.
Time is a test of trouble,
But not a remedy
If such it prove, it prove too
There was no malady

Nanda had no wish to "be drawn into a child's world again real or imaginary it was bound to betray". But here is a child who prefers "to stand apart," to be distant and elusive. The child refuses to be drawn by Nanda's stories. Her absence as much as her arrival is disquieting "Raka's genius, Raka's demon. It disturbed." Raka's indifference, her complete independence attracts Nanda, it is what she desires for herself. With Raka, Nanda senses uncanny affinity. Raka may not be responding to her, but she sees her as her doppelganger. "You are more like me than any of my children or grandchildren. You are exactly like me, Raka." It is Raka who stirs in her after all these years a desire to be loved. Her husband's adulterous affair, her children's selfish demands, her busy socializing as a Vice-Chancellor's wife, nothing had been able to shake her as profoundlyas Raka's rejection of her. The ending of the novel with Ila Das's brutal murder, Nanda's desire to be free from bondage, almost an existentialist will to rise above human obligations, fails.

The early childhood years of Raka expose her to inexplicable forms of violence and terrible suffering. Raka's detachment her rejection of the adult world and its delusions testifies to an intensely powerful femininity in a strange way impervious to male dominance. The extremities of cruelty meted out to herself and her mother makes her resentful of any precast notion of identity. She identifies with the monstrous, enigmatic alien dark interiority of wilderness and in her as if she exorcises a threatening power of nature, she would not choose to be a frozen angel but would rather be a wrathful monster woman who would reject all roles that domesticate her. Unable to identify with the adult world, she would not "socialise" with the children of her age. Her "long illness" acquitted her of any need to do so. Nothing could draw Raka to Nanda and least of all her stories of adventure laced with fantasy. The conversation between Ila Das and Nanda, the nostalgic recollection of their past repulses Raka:

> It seemed the old ladies were going to play, all afternoon, that game of old age that reconstructing, block by gilded block, of the castle of childhood, so ramshackle and precarious, and of stuffing it with that dolls' house furniture .... She very much wanted to eat her tea, but it seemed she would have to pay for it.

Nanda admits the lies she had told Raka, the persona she had assumed, her relation to her husband, her role as a perfect hostess and events about her children.

> She had lied to Raka, lied about everything. Her father had never been to Tibet he had bought the little Buddha from a traveling peddler. They had not had bears and leopards in their home, nothing but overfed dogs and bad tempered parrots. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen, he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a life long affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian

> but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication: they helped her to sleep at night, they were tranquillisers, pills. She had lied to Raka. And Ila had lied, too. Ila, too, had lied, had tried.

A deep sense of shame overwhelms Nanda; in grotesque and bizarre images, Desai captures the gothicised gorges and grooves of Nanda's wounded psyche.

> Looking down, over all those years she had survived and borne she saw them, not bare and shining as the plains below but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grand-children, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her... She thought of her sons and daughters of her confinements, some in great discomfort at home and others at the small filthy missionary-run hospital in the bazaar... She seemed to hear poignant shrieks from the canna beds in the garden a child had tumbled off the swing, another had been stung by a wasp, a third slapped by the fourth and gone out on the veranda to see them come wailing up the steps with cut lips, bruised knees, broken teeth and tears, and bent over them with that still, ironic *bow to duty that no one had noticed or defined*.

Desai exposes her readers to the dim lit corridors of feminine lives, calling into question quite a few stereotypes. Her allegiance to the subjective truths bring to the fore an awareness that looking after a family could be cumbersome and demanding as every housewife knows too well. Nanda's situation is more pathetic because engagement fake or real with her family has been most unrewarding to her. She does not get love from her husband. Always seething within even though she may appear to be happy a regal woman, respected

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by the wives and daughters of the lecturers and professors over whom her husband ruled: "Isn't she splendid? Isn't she like a queen? Really, the Vice-Chancellor is lucky to have a wife who can run everything as she does." In performing her social roles of the mother and perfect hostess, she is made to live several divided selves. While discharging her filial duty she may have annihilated herself but who bothers about it, hence her statement, "duty that no one had noticed or defined."

She is torn asunder between her two roles-social role of the Vice-Chancellor's wife and biological role of a mother. Women are maternal, but the bedrock of woman's life is happy marital life which is possible only with a considerate, understanding, loving husband. Ironically in the process of playing a perfect host and rearing children, her emotional being is constantly wounded and is reduced to a charred tree-stump, an image that recurs in the novel. It is Nanda who invests with nature her own desolation; her own fragmentation and inexorable estrangement.

The narrative catches the phantasmagoria of profoundly disturbed states of mind, of brooding, precocious childhood, the loneliness of growing years, and the impact of abused infancy. Raka rejects the idea of going to school, "She could only shake her head dumbly, hating this craftiness, rejecting outright the very thought of school, of hostels, of discipline, order and obedience." Nanda is upset by Raka's secretiveness and unsharing nature. She is complete in herself, not needing any company. The little contact that she has with Ram Lal is only to satisfy her curiosity as shown in her questioning about the laboratory and *Churail*. Nanda thinks: "Raka's genius. Raka's daemon. It disturbed." Raka detests being watched or probed: "She hated her great-grandmother intently watching her ascent." In the lawless wilderness of Kasauli, she finds a source of drive and inspiration. Within this landscape she makes a genuine, unfettered contact with herself. Fire draws Raka, when she sees it for the first time:

"Shivers ran through her, *zig-zag*, leaving streams of sweat in their wake". During that night she keeps "getting out of bed and coming barefoot into the drawing-room to look out of the window and see the fire spread".

A burnt house that she visits frequently attracts her. Her secret passion and intensity make people see her as crazy: "The caretaker of the burnt house ... saw her running. 'The crazy one,' he muttered. 'The crazy one from Carignano.' Raka's wilderness, freedom and precocity have driven readers to see in her traces of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* and Beatrice in Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter." The psychological motivation that Desai gives her character reveals conspicuous affinity with Henry James' "What Marie Knew" and Katherine Anne Porter's "Downward Path to Wisdom": both stories of initiation and experience drive home the grim consequences of a child's exposure to the viciousness and deceit of the adult world.

Her unsociability, her ease and fearlessness with nature make her unique, different from normal children which is summed up succinctly, "The child who never played games." She is not at all perturbed by dangers that may be lurking in wilderness, the mad jackals against whom Ram Lal cautions her. She walks down to the club in the moonlit night without any fear, some thing unnatural for a girl of her age. Shanta Krishnaswamy rightly observes that her "traumatic childhood has hardened her into a hard little core of solitary self-sufficiency and now recovering from a bout of typhoid, her spirit is defiant enough".

She seems to be perfectly at ease in the wilderness and she would pass her days moving around the hills and when she would come home, "She would return with her brown legs scratched, her knees bruised, sucking a finger stung by nettles, her hair brown under a layer of dust, her eyes very still and thoughtful as though she had visited strange lands and seen fantastic, improbable things that lingered in the mind." The narrative proceeds further with a prophetic tone, anticipating the culmination of the dormant fiery storm into visible-livefire:

> This hill with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one, on the ridge under the fire-singed pines, appealed to Raka with the strength of a strong sea-current- pulling, dragging. There was something about it, illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless, that made her tingle. The scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her.
>
> Not so the nurseries and bedrooms of her infancy, with their sickly sweet smells of illness, sadness, drink, medication, milk and tension. Not so the clubs and parks of the cities in which she had lived but to which no one had given her the necessary pass, the key... the safe, cosy, civilised world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment.

Nanda seems to have taken the persona of a prophet of doom, her proximity fails to provide Raka with the expected rejuvenation. Raka's private fantasies and hallucination, unlike the adolescent protagonists of conventional "innocence and experience tales" do not help her build up resistance or imaginative "counter-world" or some moments of positive illuminations. Relations have subjugated both of them, threatened them with the prospects of victimisation. In the sinister memories that pursue them the history of long drawn attrition they are forever tied to the bizarre nerve-wrecking images of patriarchal outrage and betrayal. The novel ends up as a damning critique of patriarchy.

4

The Novels of the 1980s: *Defying Her Time*

Clear Light of Day is set at various times around the partition in Old Delhi. The tension between Muslims and Hindus are clearly shown by the father's refusal to allow Raja to go to a Muslim University and study Urdu literature because he has cause to fear for his safety. The book also mentions the partition riots as well as the refugee camps. It also depicts the flight of the Alis, the Das's Muslim landlords and neighbours. These tensions often escalated into riots, but not in Old Delhi.

The Hindu's claim to India led to the neglect, abuse and often violence towards Muslims in India or Hindus in Pakistan. The nation of India was torn apart in a violent manner, leaving refugees on both side of the border and mutual anger and hostility. The suspicious nature of the partition is also evidenced in the plainclothes police who felt Raja could be a Pakistani spy.

In the book, Old Delhi is frequently referred to as old, stagnate or decaying. Old Delhi is overcrowded and generally overlooked in favour of New Delhi. New Delhi is considered vibrant, modern and alive. In the book New Delhi is where the characters, specifically Bakul, go to avoid the soporific effects of Old Delhi or even to be connected with the outside world. Bim is in New Delhi when she hears of Gandhi death, and Raja finds diversion and entertainment as a teenager in New Delhi.

The religious undercurrents in the book manifest themselves in two ways: the partition, and Raja's relationship with the Ali's. As a young adult he found acceptance in Hyder Ali's nightly gatherings. His fascination with the Muslim culture, however, first manifests itself when he takes Urdu instead of Hindi, a language he considers banal, at school. Eventually he integrates himself into the Muslim culture and marries Hyder Ali's daughter, Benazir. However this relationship is strained during the partition and the Ali's subsequent flight to Hyderabad.

In the novel Anita Desai presents her principal protagonist, Bim's life-her ways of coping with her shared past and personal past. The narrative unfolds the saga of a family, placing Bim, Tara, Raja, Baba, Mira Masi within the specific historic time. Bim and Tara have witnessed India's partition and independence from the colonial rule. The before and after of 1947 fraught with cultural and political anxieties impact the growth of the two characters. The narrative of retrieving the past might not be accurately consistent with historical authenticity, it is however the "truthful consciousness of oneself, one's character and nature" as Desai puts it in an interview which forms the core of the novel and makes it immensely readable. Bim lives multiple realities. Using technique of uncoiling memories, the narrative blends memory with imagination to describe the lives of those who experience the pain of loss, dislocation; those, who have lived deeply and sensitively.

The following novel, *In Custody* testifies to Desai's astonishingly varied range of awareness of men and women from vastly different background. Her grip on the ordinary, commonplace, even lumpen realities of an ineffectual small town college lecturer, Deven and his failures both in his social and domestic life is as tensile as her shrewd knowledge of the inner, sordid, mean-spirited world of the Urdu Poet, Nur.

Desai may not be a political novelist but her immense empathy with the insulted and injured, her identification with the travails of mankind trapped in the contingent processes of history and politics is amply demonstrated in the novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay.* The displaced, diasporic consciousness of Hugo Baumgartner strikes in us cords of compassion for those who have had different racial and political history who suffer destitution and deprivation in their craving for love and understanding.

Covering the childhood, adolescence, youth and the ageing of the Das children and coming down to modern India in the late Sixties much of the action described in the novel *Clear Light of Day* belongs to the past. The present incorporates the major event of the marriage of Raja's daughter. Tara has come from Washington with her diplomat husband Bakul to attend the marriage. As the story progresses, we have a series of episodes which explore diverse aspects of the novel. The uncaring parents of Bim died when she was hardly out of her teens and she had to shoulder the responsibilities of the family. She is one of the few characters who faces the challenges of life and performs the male role as the head of the family. This is because Raja has escaped responsibility and gone to Hyderabad to live with his landlord Hyder Ali. He later marries Hyder Ali's only daughter Benazir and lives with his in-laws. He is a *Ghar-Janwai* (a man living at the in-law's house). Tara is married to Bakul and after the death of Mira *Masi,* only Bim and Baba, her mentally retarded younger brother, are left to Jive in the house.

Desai intended the novel as a record of the passage of time and it grows accordingly as a four dimensional piece on "how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. The novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people, trying to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity." In another interview also she has spoken about the significance of time "as palpable an existence as the spatial world perceived by the five senses." Memory which is an aspect of time is signified by the epigraph of the novel which is from a poem by Emily Dickinson: "Memory is a strange bell Jubilee and knell." Elaborating on the significance and the part played by time, she says:

> What I have tried to prove is that although time appears to damage, destroy and extinguish one finds instead that nothing is lost, nothing comes to an end, but the spiral of life leads as much upwards as downwards and is in perpetual circular motion, both the past and the future existing always in time present.

In Bim's musings, one gathers the story of Raja. Raja's devotion to Hyder Ali family is motivated by the glitter and glamour of Hyder Ali's house compared to which his own house was lustreless: "He felt there could be no house as dismal as his own, as dusty and grimy and uncharming." (Desai 1980: 49) Hyder Ali is not only his ideal but in a way also a veritable father substitute. The novel makes no suggestion that by marrying a Muslim he suffered social ostracism. Tara does not sever her relationship with Raja. Bim's estrangement from Raja however is not caused by his marrying a Muslim, but by his neglect and coldness to the family.

Bim rereads Raja's letter to her that says that as he has inherited properties after Hyder Ali's death, she can continue to live in the old house on the same rent. This makes her recognise the fact that to Raja she is more a tenant than a sister. Whatever longing for affection she expects from her brother, meets with a rude jolt. She subjects herself to desolation and grief in reading the letter frequently. When Tara visits her, Bim and she share their childhood memories. The long convoluted journey into the past of Bim probes the dismal prospects of choices available to women in the middle of the 20th century. Refusing to see Bim as a "new woman," Desai wryly observes: "Women have been committed to responsibilities for centuries and a great many older women in the past generation were very courageous and strong, had great achievement."

The unhappy, frustrated, sexually unfulfilled and sometimes neurotic women of Desai's other stories seem to be replaced by a woman who has evolved her individuality. Mundane norm of happiness is not her objective. She has invested her life with values. The novel indeed represents a great leap forward in its depiction of a woman outgrowing the straitjacketing that the domestic and social constraints bring about. Unlike Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Bim does not recede into narcissistic imagination.

She rather attains a spiritually and emotionally fulfilling sense of life developing understanding towards it. Indeed Bim's character grows in spite of adversity, lovelessness and betrayal. Commitment to the deprived, orphaned, love-lorn lends meaning to her being. The delicately drawn relationship of Bim and Mira Masi or Bim and Baba form intersecting tales, recalling William Faulkner's range of human compassion, affinities and mysterious resources of authentic human urge to connect with persons of different histories in humility and love.

It is Mira Masi who nurtures Das children during the period of their growth. Identified initially as a poor distant relative of Mrs. Das, she has come to Delhi to help the family during the last confinement of Mrs. Das. She brings with her a "new season in their lives, a season of presents, of green mangoes and companionship". She performs multiple roles. Her deprivation as an adolescent, virgin widow in a perversely misogynist family subjected her to oppression and torture of the most abject kind. She sought neither love nor assurance. Treated periodically as a "useless slave" or as a "parasite" she is finally "turned out." In Das household she thinks she is needed:

> They crowded about her so that they formed a ring, a protective railing about her. Now no one could approach, no threat, no menace.

Mira Masi instinctively feels assured for the first time in her life. She may be a non-entity with neither any influence nor authority; but for the Das children she is a mother-substitute, especially for Tara and Baba. After her arrival in the Das family there is a perceptible change in the house. The children have found in her a playmate and one from whom they could draw emotional sustenance. Tara being the youngest is very attached to her. When she reaches Delhi for the first time, she brings small presents for all the children: "She drew out the things she had been making for them ever since she had received their mother's summons there were paper hats trimmed with parrot feathers, little slippers of felt and velvet for Tara's dolls, a scrap book of wedding and birthday cards for Bim, lions and giraffes made out of sticks and straw for Raja." Bim's own mother never had time nor inclination to devote her life to the children. She was always busy playing cards or visiting the club with her husband. Almost always sick she was also a diabetic. The children were always forced to maintain a distance from the parents.

In this household, Mira Masi finds the scope to channel her maternal instincts. In feeding them, rearing them, supporting them, she becomes an indispensable mother figure:

> They wrapped themselves around her, smothering her in leaves and flawns. She laughed at the profusion, the beauty of a little grove that was the whole forest to her, the whole world. They sucked her dry of sustenance, she would give in without any sacrifice of will-it seemed in keeping with nature to do so.... She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth. She gives without asking or expecting in return: "Touching them watching them."

In drawing her in the images of mother earth, Desai reveals abundance of maternal principle in the lives of unloved, unfulfilled women. And yet, could Mira Masi stop living in memories? The early experiences of being heckled, insulted and silted rebound on her with relentless impact.

Advancing age however drives her to derangement, realm of delusion in her old age. She loses control over herself, tears out her clothes to the embarrassment of Bim. Her long suppressed unfulfilled self surfaces. In her state of delusion she becomes obsessed with the images of "the hidden scummy pool in which the bride-like cow they had once had rowned." In such a state it is only Bim who could understand and empathise. The "bride like cow" is Mira Masi, the child bride, withered and wasted with the demise of her young husband.

Bim is shown growing as prematurely older with gray wisps of hair. In the backward and forward movement of the story, we encounter the cheerless years of her life as a schoolteacher living alone with Baba in the decaying house. Long years spent in taking care of the family, nursing Baba and senile Mira *Masi*, seem to have dried up the spring of love in her heart. When Tara and Bakul visit her, she tends to be in sour moods, always irritable and bitter. When Bakul proposed marriage to Tara years ago seeking Bim's approval, she says: "I don't think you need to ask any one-except Tara. Modern times. Modern India. Independent India". Bim had begun to gray in her youth, Bakul cracks a joke: "I'll have to buy you a bottle of Blacko for your hair, Bim.... I won't have you coming gray-haired to my wedding. Can't have such an elderly sister-in-law, I can't." Though she is tall and graceful, more appealing than Tara, the latter draws men. Not that she could not attract men, but she preferred to avoid them. In her younger days, Dr. Biswas was attracted to her and was likely to propose marriage to her, but she was too preoccupied with her family to think about marriage. Dr. Biswas had encouraged her to have some time for her own self and not to slave herself for the family.

He gives his own instance and argues: "I can't be a slave to my mother. We must be ourselves. You must go out, have a little rest, some refreshment." From the very beginning she had a missionary zeal in her character and her ideals were

Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc. In the missionary school where Tara and Bim had studied, the latter had shown enthusiasm in going to the hospital to distribute blankets and fruits to poor patients and women who had recently given birth to children in the Maternity Wards.

Tara would avoid such visits, and on the Thursdays (called Charity Day), she would make excuses not to go to school. Dr. Biswas observes that Bim seems possessed by a spirit of martyrdom which almost verges on masochism, representing the fervour that takes hold of the religious leaders or social reformer or family slaves. She herself does not realise her problem and it is Dr. Biswas who points it out to her. Once when he visits her house to attend Mira *Masi,* he says: "Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others to your sick brother and aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you al! his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them." But she refuses to accept this fact and in her con-fined rage "shook the thought of Biswas out of her," and later "she never acknowledged, even to herself that this ridiculous scene had ever taken place."

Bim is one of the few seemingly practical women in the novels of Anita Desai who are strong-willed enough to face the challenges of life and to assume family responsibilities like a man. The narrative presents Mishra girls as her variation, who are her neighbours. Even though they are much inferior to her in respect of education and refinement, they too are the bread-earners for their families. The Mishras are a queer lot where women work and men merely waste time drinking whisky and going to *Muzaras* (song and dance of prostitutes). Ironically, the Mishra sisters married early, have had broken marriage; they were unable to adjust themselves to their 'advanced' husbands who are defence personnel and that brought them back to their parents' house for good. On the other hand, the wives of their brothers have deserted them and live elsewhere in New Delhi.

Desai's description of the sisters is brutally acerbic: "Then the sisters cracked like old dry pods from which the black seeds of protest and indignation split, infertile." Bim is a contrast to them who believes in her independence, going back in time, reinvokes the scene when the Mishra sisters' engagement is to take place.

Tara and Bim apprehend the likely incompatibility that might follow the marriages. Bim feels, "I don't know why they're in such a hurry to get married? ... they're not *educated* yet" (140), and tells Tara that marriage is not sufficient to last them the whole of their lives. Tara who is less mature wonders what can be anything more than marriage in a girl's life. Bim makes her intentions very clear, that for her marriage is not necessary. There are other things in life for her than just marriage:

> I can think of hundreds of things to do instead. I won't marry…I won't... I shall never leave Saba and Raja and *Mira-masi,* I shall work-I shall do things .... I shall earn my own living and look after *Mira-masi* and Saba and-and be independent. There'll be so many things to do-when we are grown up-when all this is over ... then-then-but she couldn't finish for emotion, and her eyes shone in the dusk.

Bim's father never bothered to educate her to be self-reliant, yet on her own she continues her study and finds a teaching job. She is a student of History and has a love for reading. She may live with limited means, but for books she could always manage money. Desai calls her a "triumph" and a "paradox." Her individuality remains uninvaded, her self-possession remains unruffled. And yet she could be prickly, introspective, self--appraising-painfully conscious of her limitations:

> How many students would laugh at me. I'm always trying to teach them, train them to be different from what we were at their age to be a new kind of woman from you and me-and if they knew how badly handicapped I still am, how I myself haven't been able

> to manage on my own-they'd laugh, wouldn't they? They'd despise me.

Desai's subtle observation brings to the fore the ironic misrepresentation of Bim and makes us infer the grossly incorrect judgements that the neighbours and acquaintances give in comparing and contrasting the two sisters as binary opposites. Tara knows better. She knows that Bim is as emotionally fragile as Tara herself is and also that Bim has suffered profoundly in the past. The characters of History like Aurangzeb, their agonised introspection and loneliness haunt Bim. Bim realises that she has to take her own decisions in life and there can be no external help. When her father's insurance business has to be taken care of, Tara asks her to seek Bakul's advice, but Bim says she has to take her own decisions. The ending of the novel brings about a reunion of the family. In spite of the bruises, the betrayal that she had:

> Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all, and if there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and *did not extend to all equally*. She didn't feel enough for her dead parents, her understanding of them was incomplete and she would have to work and labour to acquire it.

She is new in possession of decision, firmness and resolve. She would want to rely on her own resources; her revelations bring a knowledge that within everyone there is light and shadowl good and evil, love and hate. Her expansion enables her to accept herself, there is nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide. Her life takes on the generosity and warmth that marks great love. She has taken a flight above her given circumstances and she could say, "I leave no trace of wings in the air, but I am glad 1 had my flight."

The seventh novel of Desai, *In Custody* (1984) probes the mental and emotional vicissitudes of a diffident, passive lecturer in Hindi, Deven Sharma, working on a temporary basis in a private college of a small town, Mirpore. The principal interest of the story is his fascination for Nur Shahjahanbadi, a reputed old Urdu poet and this brings about a series of comic and pathetic ordeals in his life. He has also written a monograph on the poetry of Nur, although it remains unpublished. His school friend, Murad, brings out an Urdu journal *Awaz* for which Deven has reviewed books. When one day Murad comes to Mirpore and offers Deven the assignment of interviewing the aging poet Nur, it seems as though he has been given a chance to enter "heaven," "the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings." For him, Nur was a poet of "god-like magnitude."

Deven is a low paid teacher who somehow manages to keep his body and soul together. He has learnt Urdu from his father who was also a school teacher and from him he also inherited the negative qualities of his personality, lack of self-confidence and timidity and he himself is placed in no better circumstances than his father and that is why he identifies himself with him in his dark moments:

> His father who had been a chronic sufferer of asthma and whose career had foundered upon his invalidism and appeared always to be apologising to his wife who had expected more from her husband and felt grievously disappointed at the little he had made of his life. As a child Deven had barely understood this but now that he himself occupied a not very dissimilar position at home, he felt protective towards the dead man, and in his imagination glorified and deified him as he had not done when he was living. At magical moments like this, the fantasy took on the stuff of truth.

He has to go to Delhi to interview the poet which taxes his pocket, he cannot think of missing the opportunity though he is extremely nervous about his ability to properly interview the poet. The interview which should have been a matter of some hours drags on for months, leading Deven from one trouble to another. When his money runs out, he applies for a grant from the college and with the help of the Urdu teacher Siddique and the Registrar, he is sanctioned a grant to purchase a tape recorder with the condition that it would be submitted later on to the college library. Nur's house is too crowded and noisy for the purpose and therefore a neighbouring house is rented for the interview. Deven has to bribe the elder wife of Nur for taking the interview. Meanwhile the younger wife of Nur puts one obstacle after the other, since she herself is a poet of sorts and because of jealousy does not want her husband to go on record in history through the interview. Murad cheats him by arranging a sale through a shopkeeper of an old tape recorder and also deputes a boy to handle it.

But as luck would have it, when at long last the interview takes place the boy dozes off and misses out the relevant portions of the interview. Ironically, what could be taped was merely Nur's filthy abuses and irrelevant babblings about food, wrestlers and his glorious past. When he comes back to the college, some of his students agree to help him in editing the tape on the condition that he would show favour to them in marking their examination scripts. When he does not comply with them, he receives their threats. Meanwhile the college administration seeks his explanation. Pushed to such intractable position, he is made to appear deceitful. The lies, pretentiousness and contradictory circumstances drive Deven to pathetic failure and he ends up in the custody of ironic and malevolent forces beyond his control. Deven could very well be seen as a representative of ordinary man lacking adequate intellectual resources and insight to combat with the world which thrives on selfish interests and expediency.

Desai's method of story-telling in comic, ironic and occasionally stinging modes gets to the psychological roots of Deven's failures. She makes us see why he could never bloom into a balanced assertive personality capable of coping with the challenges of life. "All through his childhood and youth he had known only one way to deal with life and that was to lie low and remain invisible." By nature he is 'tactless' and timid. That is why he is bullied and cowed down by everyone, be it his Head of the Department Mr. Trivedi or Murad or Mr. Jain who sells him a secondhand tape recorder or even his own students whom he cannot face with confidence, although he intends to be a sincere teacher. After a meeting with Murad in the beginning of the novel and in spite of being humiliated by him, he does not miss his classes.

While teaching, instead of looking at the students, he "would look away quickly and focus his eyes upon the door at the far end of the room, the door that opened on to the passage, freedom and release ... ignoring his class and speaking to himself or someone outside invisible." No wonder he could not command the attention, "let alone win regard of his unruly class." His tactlessness always lands him in unfavourable situations and he is not unaware of it. Lack of effective communication in the domestic sphere makes his wife suspicious of his proposed visit to Delhi. She thinks that he is going to Delhi to meet some girl. But instead of telling her the truth, he just keeps silent: "But that was how it was with him, he sighed: his reflexes, sluggish out of a habitual timidity and indecisiveness, were showing still further, tardy in both thought and deed. He was never ready with the apt word or appropriate action: both seemed to trail him at a moody distance." He is not only wanting in self-confidence, it seems he lacks the initiative, the drive and the proactive spirit to rise in life. This is clearly stated by the novelist:

> Had he had more spirit, more nerve, more desire and ambition, then perhaps he would have instead hunted for success, distinction, magic. Perhaps he would have followed in pursuit of art, published a book of poetry, earned a name for himself, a little fame, even gold bangles for Sarla.

Deven's love for Urdu and devotion to it, instead of being rewarding, antagonises his Head of the Department, Mr. Trivedi. The novel abounds in numerous debates on

Hindi and Urdu. The two literatures deserve the right perspectives: aesthetic, literary and human. In Nur's house, during an engaging conversation when the merits of Urdu are being discussed, Nur's aggressive and hysteric passions surface. Urdu, he vehemently argues, is not only the language of lilting verses glorifying women and wine but much more:

> "I tell you, we must get over this rolling of Urdu verses into little sugar pills for babies to suck. We need the roar of lions or boom of cannon, so that we can march upon these Hindi-wallahs and make them run. Let them see the power of Urdu," he thundered. "They think it is chained and tamed in the dusty yards of those cemeteries that they call universities, but can't we show them that it can still let out a roar or a boom?"

Nur's impassioned defence of Urdu and attack on its detractors takes an obscene tone: "Yes, alright, that will also be a kind of assault on their noses anyway. Yes, let Urdu issue from any orifice as long as it drives them away." The same suggestions regarding the more practical use of the language is disregarded when a more practical man suggests: "Turn to journalism instead, Nur Sahib. Reach out to the people directly. We have a message for them. Tell them in plain speech. Use your power, for the purpose of attack and vengeance."

When Deven goes to Mr. Trivedi asking for a week's leave to go to Delhi to interview Nul, he flares up and threatens to transfer him to the Urdu Department, not realising the sheer stupidity of his threat. The conflict of languages: Urdu versus Hindi takes on a political implication in Trivedi's outburst:

> "One week? it would be a relief to me if it were one year," bawled Trivedi, "and I didn't need to see your stupid mug again. I'll have you demoted Sharma-I'll see to it you don't get your confirmation. I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu department. I won't have Muslim toadies in my department, you'll ruin my boys with your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language. I'll

complain to the Principal, I'll warn the R.S.S., you are a traitor".

None is willing to understand Deven's innocent love for Urdu literature. The muddled up value system tended to associate language with one's political allegiance and sectarian passion. Deven's love of literature is in a way a social handicap since he cannot earn as much money as a technically qualified man. He has to make the two ends meet somehow, facing humiliation from his own wife whom he cannot provide better things in life.

Even students know it well that attending classes of Hindi–literature has no practical return in life and they tell Deven that it is better to have technical qualification to make them technicians or mechanics and thereby earning livelihood rather than listening to lectures on Nirala's poetry or Prem Chand's fiction. They tell Deven, "Why should we waste our time learning Hindi when we can pick up some useful skills that will help us find employment? ... Hindi does not help get you employment."

Desai's portrayal makes us see Deven's hero-worshipping and obsession with Nul' as naive and misplaced. Nur's poetry may be exalting and highly romantic, but as a person he is mean-spirited, hypocritical and stupid. He does not leave the opportunity of squeezing money, wine and food from Deven. Nur wants his "loutish entourage," actually parasites, being served with drinks and *Biryani* and *pulao*. Till the end of the novel, Nur's letters keep pouring in, asking Deven for money, for medicine, for his wife's treatment, reaching the point of absurdity, even demanding money for his pilgrimage to *Haz* and for the maintenance of his son, as though Deven is responsible for every ailment in his life, from his failing health to maintaining two wives and feeding his parasites.

The absurdity of the whole expedition haunts Deven's mind like a nightmare. He has the hallucinations of Nur's funeral. He does not know what was the end of his life or if there was any end at all:

> Where was the end? Was there one? He had a vision of Nur's bier, white, heaped with flowers, rose and marigold, bright flashing flowers on the white sheet. He saw the women in the families weeping and wailing around it. He heard the funeral music play. He saw the shroud, the grave-open. When Nul' was laid in it, would this connection break, this relation end? No, never-the bill should come to him, he would have to pay for the funeral, Support the widows, raise his son.

The slatternly description of Nur's household discloses profligacy, decadence and greed. The farcical undertone describes the crude games of power that the two wives play against each other. Filthy abuses float in the atmosphere. The elder wife is unlettered and her only concern is to browbeat the younger wife and in one episode the two fight also using most filthy abuses liberally.

The younger one who had been a prostitute, claims to have literary talent that disgusts Deven because the verses that she recited were third rate and miles away from Nur's sublime poetry. Because of constant disturbance and interference, the elder wife suggests a separate house for privacy and peace for the interview. Without telling Deven that it is a rented place, she fixes a meeting with Nul' stealthily. Deven has a hunch that this might be a rented place and his apprehension comes true when the rent bill is sent to him. The intersecting burlesque and intrigues serve as the parody of Nur's claim for greatness.

Desai caustically treats Nur and his likes like Siddique, an Urdu lecturer, in subtly driving home her cynical observations about the prospects of Urdu literature in India. Nul' still lives in the past glory of Moghul culture when Urdu deriving from Persian flourished especially in the last part of Moghul rule in India. Even a late Moghul poet of 19th century, Mirza Ghalib wrote much of his poetry in Persian rather than Urdu. Desai traces the genesis of Urdu to the army camps. Certainly that grew with time but received literary recognition much later.

One may sense the novelist's contempt for the breed of decadent poets and their devotees who have not been able to resurrect themselves from the sordid conditions of the past and dead obsolete, decayed values. A devotee of this cult, Deven comes to a delayed realisation that the hope for a wider world that he nurtured in his contact with Nur would turn out to be a kind of zoo abounding with predators and perverts.

Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) lets us have a psychologically realistic portrayal of a displaced person, Mr. Hugo Baum-gartner. Baumgartner has lived first in Germany and then in India, both pre-independence and post-independence. The novel covers a long span of time-from Hugo Baumgartner's child-hood to his murder at the age of about fifty or so. It is the story of a man who is persecuted by society both in his own country and his adopted country, although for entirely different reasons. In his native Germany he is a victim of racial prejudice simply because he is a Jew.

In India even though he has lived for several decades, he is still known as a firangi. When his father's flourishing furniture business is destroyed by fanatic Nazis, he is advised to try his luck in colonial India. He comes to Calcutta and for some time he does well in the timber business. In the meantime the Second World War breaks out, and in spite of the fact that he has nothing to do with the Nazi Germany holding a German passport, warrants his arrest as an alien citizen of a hostile country. He is put in captivity along with other Germans for six years in a camp in the foothills of Himalayas.

When he is released after the War, he goes to Calcutta only to find the city scorching in communal frenzy coinciding with the partition of the country. He comes to Bombay and settles down there, living an ascetic life. In the late Sixties and early Seventies when India was littered with so many hippies or flower children, he is killed by a German drug addict hippie whom out of human sympathy he has taken to his house.

Hugo is killed for a small amount of money that the hippie needed for his drug by stealing a few silver, actually a few silver-plated, trophies.

For having recovered a lost slice of history, the novel is hailed as a sensitive portrayal of a wounded survivour of history. Baumgartner's awareness of rejection and "otherness" began with his childhood in Germany. The brutality of racial discrimination dawns upon his childlike mind. Why his mother arrived later after all the mothers had left, with the coveted bourbon after school, why he alone was denied the Christmas present and why the word "Jude" printed in red across their shop window. The sense of inexplicable mystery and shame always disturbed him:

> The sense that he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir tree, the gifts and the celebration? But no one had said that. Was it just that he sensed he did not belong to the radiant, the triumphant of the world? A strange sensation, surely, for a child. He could not understand it himself, or explain it. It baffled him, and frightened him even.

In a dispensation when Jews were being identified as aliens, Baumgartner's parents were forced to put him in an exclusively Jewish school, he is ridiculed by children, being taunted "Baumgartner's dumb/has a nose like a thumb." He is misfit here because of his early secular and cosmopolitan upbringing. He fails to adjust himself in the school.

The hysterical teacher who tore out his own hair and theirs pupils by the handful, the strange language in which he recognised only every third or fourth word, and the forbidding sound of the Torah.

Baumgartner grew up during a period in European history when Jews were being alienated and persecuted with missionary zeal. The Nazi regime of Hitler was dedicated to the extermination and deracination of Jews. The details of different lives into which Hugo is propelled, the texture of the places, from the upholstered luxury of his childhood to the pavements of Calcutta and the scent of jasmine and urine are transcribed with sombre precision and unsparing irony.

The narrative gleans the pattern of sequences from Baumaartner's childhood when he belonged to a prosperous and cultured family. His mother, Frau Baumgartner, embodied delicate beauty and a cosmopolitan mind.

Hugo remembers one of his visits with her to a relative in some suburb of Berlin where there would be talk of poetry, "an element in his mother's life that he understood as little as his father did," and the talk about beauty, art and literature would be unending.

Frau Friedmann "described a strange Indian poet whose work she had been reading, a sage with a long white beard and long hair and piercing, hypnotic eyes. 'A sage from Bengal,' she explained to Hugo's entranced mother ... a book of poems was brought for them to see; ... its title was meaningless to Hugo-Gitanjali." Even a poem is dedicated to Tagore called "On Reading Tagore."

But very soon the pre-Second World War German culture changes into parochial, fanatic Nazi regime. With the rise of the social Democrats, more popularly and notoriously known as the Nazis, persecution of Jews begins and his father's business is virtually confiscated by the state. In his quest to belong, Hugo ventures into other lands as an archetypal Wandering Jew. Hugo sails for India to try his luck. In Venice, where he stays for a week enroute to India, he wants to go to the Jewish Quarters, as though out of Germany he becomes more conscious of being a Jew and has the sense of Jewish fraternity:

> Strange, in Germany he had never wanted to search them Jews out, had been aware of others thinking of him as a Jew but not done so himself. In ejecting him, Germany had taught to regard himself as one.... Perhaps over here he would find for himself a new identity, one that suited him, one that he enjoyed. The air quivered with possibilities, ies, with suspense of quest and choice.

Reaching Bombay, he is bewildered by Indians and their incomprehensible English. He meets Chaman Lal whose English phonetically is anything but English:

> Ex-pawt! ... Ex-pawl. Of course, ex-pawl. Germany, Europe. Shipping, timber-I know, I know .... Chamanlal ... began to talk of business, of exports, of shipping, of trade in what seemed to Baumgartner, a bewildering combination of two or three languages.

On his way to Calcutta, two British soldiers are travelling in the same compartment but he "could not understand a word, was not certain even that it was English. They rolled their words in their mouths, like potatoes. They were as foreign as those children on the platform black, naked, raucous." In Calcutta he is taken to be a Tommy, for to an Indian, any white man then seemed a Tommy.

Late at night when he goes out to buy cigarettes, he comes across two prostitutes: "he was hailed by two women .... They wore white frocks, like nurses, ... they smiled at him, waving 'Hoo-hoo, To-mmy ... they grabbed him by an arm each crying, 'Less have drink, Tommy, come awn.' Baumgaltner's complexion is a handicap for him because in colonial India he is taken to be a Britisher, a Sahib, firanghi and therefore he cannot belong to Indians. He wished he could be darker but "Daily he grew redder. Would he one day be darker? It seemed desperately important to belong and make a place for himself." But he would never belong even after his fifty years' stay in India.

His tragedy is that after the war, his Germany is gone and he cannot go back there and his adopted country India does not want to accept him. When Lotte, a German woman who is his friend, and at times sleeps with him, bursts out saying that they are fools to stay in India "amongst the thieves, the cholera, the mosquitoes," Baumgartner rightly says: "Where could we go, Lotte? Where could you and I have gone?" Lotte agrees with him, "yes, there was nowhere to go. Germany was gone-phut. Europe was gone. All of it. Let us face it, Liebchen, there is no home for us. So where can we go? Hah? Tell me."

But Baumgartner's greatest shock comes when he is arrested for being a German when the war breaks out. The Indian Police Inspector who arrests him is respectful to him and addresses him as Sahib and is apologetic, "I have to arrest you, Sir. War is declared and we must take you into detention camp. Very bad, Sir, very bad.... British make rules here, Sir, not Indians." Baumgaltner is relieved to be in the hands of an Indian, not a white man's. Even though Baumgartner being a Jew is persecuted by Nazi Germany, yet he is regarded as an enemy, an alien, because he is "German, born in Germany" and that is enough. He protests against this blind prejudice, "Yes, but of Jewish origin, therefore a refugee" but before he could finish "He was caught by his sleeve and propelled out of the tent into a queue waiting to be handed into a truck." From Calcutta he is taken to the Central internment camp in Ahmednagar where the 'hostile aliens' from all over India were kept.

There the aliens were screened to find out reasons and ways to keep them in captivity. He wished to convince the authorities that he was a harmless Jew from Germany, "certain they would see he had been arrested for no reason, being harmless, no enemy, merely a refugee from Nazi Germany, who wished only to pursue his business interests in India." But all this was in vain. He had more than one interview, spending many hours standing in slow moving queues, but it proved futile. All his arguments failed: "What am I to do then?" the man bawled when Baumgartner again protested at being labelled a German and 'hostile':

> Got a German passport, says you were born there, then what am I supposed to take you for, a "bloomin' Indian?" The papers were flung at him, and he retreated, baffled, wondering what magic world he might find that would release him from what was a monstrous mistake, or madness.

The Nazi sympathisers in the camp bullied him and compelled him to raise his right hand and say 'Hail Hitler.' Therefore, he "was willing to go along with all these absurdities in the resigned, half-hearted way taught him by years of helpless submission to bullying, first in Germany, then in the camp, which was an extension of the former." He realises that "silence was his natural condition." Now that he wishes to forget and erase his German identity, his German identity pursues him like a ghost and makes him suffer in 'captivity for six years.'

After the war is over, he is released from the camp and goes to Calcutta but now it is another city, a city reeling under communal riots. His old business associate Habibullah is perturbed at the new developments that would ultimately bring about the country's partition. Habibullah is also made the victim of riotous communalism besetting the partition. For him, India is finished, "Don't you know, Sahib, they are driving us out?" Baumgartner fails to understand because during his long confinement in the detention camp he had lost touch with domestic developments of the country and he asks who is driving them out:

> "These-these Congress-wallahs, Sahib, the Hindus ... they say that will kick out the British .... And this man Jinnah, and his party-they are wanting partition, they are also wanting to leave. All Muslims should leave, they say. But-how? I have so much my family, my home, my business-what will happen to it all, Sahib?" he cried, nearly in tears.

He advised Baumgartner to leave Calcutta for Bombay. The communal riot flares up and the next day when he goes to inquire after Habibullah's welfare, he does not find him: "the office empty, ransacked." Hugo is pained at the whole affair of communal violence:

> Baumgartner felt himself overtaken by yet another war of yet another people. Done with the global war, the colonial war, only to be plunged into a religious war.

> Endless war. Eternal war. Twenty thousand people, the newspaper informed him, were killed in three days of violence in Calcutta. Muslims killed Hindus, Hindus Muslims. Baumgartner could not fathom it-to him they were Indians seen in a mass and, individually, Sushi I the Marxist, Habibullah the trader.

He is concerned about Habibullah's welfare because he was good and kind to him and gave him business. When he talks about him to Chamanlal, he is given an unconvincing answer:

> Ah, my friend, you don't need to worry about Habibullah. Habibullah is much cleverer than Hindu goondas, Hindu thugs. He will have taken all his wealth with him, he must be in Dacca now, the home of his ancestors, happy and safe.

Indian society, by and large, may not accept Hugo but there are individuals who treat him well. He receives warmth and respect and gentle hospitality from Chamanlal:

> Baumgartner could not discover why he (Chamanlal) took up a homeless foreigner, not even one with the prestige of having been an erstwhile ruler, a part of the colonial might and power, but simply a stray, a pariah in the eyes of the raj, clearly the most powerless of all.

With Farrokh, a Parsi owner of restaurant where he goes for food every day also develops affection for Baumgartner. After Baumgartner's tragic murder, he cries bitterly. Though Baumgartner has resigned himself to the barbarity that arises out of ethnic and racial hostilities, the generosity of persons like Chamanlal and Farrokh provides him with the faith and hope that all human values have not perished.

Chamanlal often invited Hugo to his house for lunch. They would go together to the racecourse and bet on horses and win money also. On one such visit to the racecourse, Chamanlal collapsed and fainted. Baumgartner held his head in his lap till an ambulance came and took him to hospital. His son resented Baumgartner and threw such "furious looks at him as if he were responsible for his father's illness and then turned him out of the ward, insisting that he be left alone with his father." Chamanlal died after an operation of tumour. It was a grim loss to Baumgartner. His visit to the cremation ground made him painfully aware of his tabooed presence:

> Baumgartner joined the mourners at the cremation, standing at the edge of the crowd, all of whom shrank away from him, horrified by the presence of a foreigner, a firanghi, at such an intensely private rite. Hearing the babbling chant of the priests, seeing the confusion around the pyre, smelling the odours of burnt flesh and charred wood under the noon-time sun, Baumgartner too wished he had not come, and shuffled away.

Craving for acceptance and genuine human contact drives Hugo to find solace in the company of animals. He has picked up several wounded and stray cats from the streets and his flat in Hira Nivas is full of them. He goes daily to Farookh's restaurant to collect leftovers for cats. Every cat has a name and he talks with them tenderly: "He bent down and picked up the nearest catthere was always one nearby. Holding its fur to his chest, he closed his eyes as a young man might with a photograph of his eyes as a young man might with a photograph of his beloved held close. Here was all the friendship he needed or wanted 'Mmm, mmm' he nuzzled into the gray fur 'du Alte, du Gute, du.' The cat growled a little, then began to purr." People call him as eccentric and Billiwala Pagal. Desai describes his sentimental musings on the chart of his life in India:

> He had lived in this land for fifty years or if not fifty then so nearly as to make no difference-and it no longer seemed fantastic and exotic, it was more utterly familiar now than any other landscape on earth, yet the eyes of the people who passed by glanced at him, he was still strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said: Firanghi, foreigner. For the Indian sun had not been good to his

> skin, it had not tanned and roasted him to the colour of a native.... His hair would not turn black ... what could he have done about his eyes? It was not that they were blue-far from it; his mother, holding him on her knee ... had called them 'dark eyes, dunkele Augen,' but Indians did not seem to think them so. Their faces sneered 'firanghi, foreigner,' however good-naturedly, however lacking in malice .... Accepting but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark-his darkness had marked him the Jew, der Jude. In India he was fair-and that marked him the firanghi. In both lands the unacceptable. Perhaps even where his cats were concerned he was that man, not feline, not theirs. He nodded thoughtfully; Ja, the cats, they always knew.

Like Bye-Bye Blackbird, this novel astutely probes the psychology of racism. Nurturing prejudice against the people with different colour of skin or different shape of nose is a cultural phenomenon that prevails across continents, in advanced societies of Europe and in India.

Lotte and Gisela, the two dancers at Prince's in Calcutta are the women whose survival and identity is linked to their sexuality in an alien land. Gisela, now Gala after the war, turns out to be luckier of the two, but to Lotte who chooses to live as a white memsahib of Sethia, the sense of belonging always eludes. Though she is not as sensitive as Baumgartner, she is seen as a promiscuous woman whom we meet first in the pre-War Calcutta, the British Calcutta with bars and Tommies. Hugo meets her in one of those bars.

A Marwari Seth, Kantilal, takes fancy to her and she becomes his mistress and to make things less scandalous she is given money and a flat in Bombay. In his short visit to Bombay, Kanti would stay with Lotte. Kanti dies of ulcer. Lotte would request him not to drink, but he would not listen to her: "What did I come to Bombay for then? You, and a drink, that is my life, that is what I live for. Give me more whisky." It is ironical that she has developed emotional attachment for Seth Kantilal even though she was perceived to be no more than a prostitute. Desai seems to be suggesting that the inner working of human heart does not always follow the dictates of one's practical mind. Lotte is a sexy woman even in the present time of the novel, a middle-aged woman with a "generous meaty triangle." She would force herself on Baumgartner to make love to her, although he was not very keen about it.

Lotte is rejected by Kanti's family after his death. She is not the legitimate wife of Kanti, she loves him like a real wife. She has accepted some of the religious and cultural values of Hindus, like wearing gold bangles, symbolic of a married Hindu woman. She tells Baumgartner: "See, each bangle here is from Kanti: solid gold, twenty-two carats like Indian women wear. ... Now I'm afraid these thieves will murder me for it ... but I can't take them off and put them in the bank. It is like taking off your wedding-ring.

Hindu women do it when they become widows." When Kanti Sethia was alive, Lotte had a place in his family, even though rejected by Mrs. Sethia, the real one, the Marwari Sethani. Lotte reminisces about the old days when Kanti was alive and she would take care of his sons, like a mother: "Those boys-I know them when they were little. If they were sick, I made them porridge. At night I sat holding ice to their foreheads. . . . Not even a thermometer they had in the house till I went and got one. If they wanted to dress smart, I went and chose their clothes."

But Kanti's death changes everything. Lotte laments over the pitiable state of Kanti's death: "In Calcutta, I was not even there to hold his hand. His family was already fighting over the property—: "no one even to hold his hand, there in the hospital. Dogs die like that, in the street." After Kanti's death, his sons refuse to recognise Lotte: "But when Kanti was dead, then they said, "Who is this woman? We don't know this woman. Throw her out." Her case is similar to that of Baumgartner who ill partnership with Chamanlal had bought a race horse, but after the latter's death when he approached his son to settle the issue of money involved in the purchase, Chamanlal's son coldly dismissed him since there was no paper regarding the purchase of the horse:

> "Show me one paper you have signed or my father has signed" And when he says that there are no papers, the boy said stiffly, "My father is no more, Mr. Baumgartner .... He has left for his heavenly abode."

Baumgartner understood that with Chamanlal's death "all connections with the firm, formal or friendly, had ceased, and got up to, leave. The boy did not wish him good-bye." From the world he inhabited, he sought the joys of friendship and care. Though he found himself hurled in several worlds, struggled with the knowledge that he has to live far outside the box of typical human existence, and yet he intended to learn to live, to love with deep fervour and wisdom. His life had not been unrewarding. It is not easy to identify with Baumgartner, however, one may draw from his story an understanding how the multiple configurations of history alienate not only an individual but also communities. His alienation and brutal rejection may have been brought about by his contingent location in history, but the betrayal, deceit and insults he suffers are the ones that any innocent, sensitive human being is likely to encounter in the human world. In rendering the tribulation of Hugo Baumgartner, Desai seems to posit her faith in human dignity not among the fortunate and the powerful but among the oppressed and the defeated. In spite of his existential thrownness in the flux of history, Hugo Baumgartner confronts life with strength and integrity.

5

Quest for Spiritual Fulfilment and Psychic Annihilation

Anita Desai's Journey to Ithaca (1995) is a manifestation of the wisdom of Oriental philosophy as Desai turns to Vedanta and Upanishads to convey her vision of spirituality.

In Journey to Ithaca Anita Desai presents a transcendental vision where Matteo and Leila's journey acquires a symbolic undertone. The spiritual quest theme culminates into a transcendental experience which is quite difficult to communicate in ordinary words.

Anita Desai, an eminent personality in the sphere of Indian English literature, seems to have an innate zeal to help ordinary people move towards some awareness of the depths of spiritual development which forms the central symbolic theme of the novel Journey to Ithaca. In spite of living among adverse conditions and various kinds of temptations Matteo and Laila ultimately reach their goal of self-realisation.

As the process of self-realisation or spiritual fulfillment is quite difficult to convey in ordinary words, Desai has turned to nature symbolism to communicate the same. This lends the novel a deep spiritual vision. Desai projects it through the use the symbols and images. The major symbols and images used by Desai are namely the image of journey, mountain, water, crows, lotus, fire, rain, river and the symbolic names of characters as well as other similar devices.

Journey to Ithaca encapsulates the wisdom of Oriental philosophy as Desai turns to Vedanta and Upanishads. In

Journey to Ithaca Anita Desai, a philosophically inclined novelist, attempts to explore the meaning and nature of reality and also of illusion as two contrasted worlds of ideas and beliefs. Through the spiritual journey of Matteo and Laila (the Mother) a whole range of the philosophy and thought of the East is subtly explored as a way of life, as a breath of existence.

As a widely travelled writer, Desai would endorse what Santayana says in his essay "The Philosophy of Travel": travel is wakefulness, like love it brings about a heightened state of awareness in which one grows mindful, receptive, undimmed by familiarity and ready to be transformed. That is why the best trips like the best love affairs never really end." In Fasting, Feasting, one may sense the apparent semblance of Jane Austen's stories of a provincial family: mother, father, sisters, brother, aunts, preoccupied with love, matchmaking and marriage. This novel ironically unmasks the sordid, ugly truths of female drudgery and stifled lives of immured, circumscribed world of Uma, Anamika, Mira Masi or even Mama. The novel through indirections indicts conventional family values attached to femininity. What Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar perceive in The Madwoman in the Attic is apparent in Desai's depiction of Maya, Nanda, Raka, Bim, Mira Masi. This novel even more forcefully portrays the process of anxious self-denial and social castration, the feeling of powerlessness and anger that afflict homely but 'homeless' women. In spite of being vastly different in thematic content, in both the novels, Journey to Ithaca and Fasting, Feasting, time and human personality dissolve in multiple perspectives.

The traveller characters Matteo, Sophie and Laila in Journey to Ithaca evolve through the journeys they venture into. Matteo's frantic search for flight recalls Arun Joshi's characters in The Foreigner and The Last Labyrinth-characters trying to live between two cultures. Like the protagonists of Arun Joshi's novels, Matteo has frantic desires for spiritual knowledge and the transformation it brings about. Som Bhaskar comes to a recognition that "Prayer does not change

God, but changes him who prays." The kaleidoscopic cityscapes of the West as they travel towards the east make us behold the changes brought about in the consciousness of Matteo and Laila. The first section of the novel describes in ironic undertones the lives of Matteo and Sophie caught in the contradiction of values and desires. In a retrospective narration, Matteo and Sophie's journey recreates the west of the 1970s, the flight of young western people to India. Matteo, Italian, raised in the luxurious countryside around lake Camo, restless since childhood has been introduced by his tutor to Herman Hesse's Journey to the East, and it opens in him a desperate longing. Indeed Hesse's text is of the kind that has impacted a whole generation of youth, seeking enlightenment.

> Divine and eternal is the spirit
>
> Our way leads toward him whose
>
> Image and instrument we are.
>
> Our innermost yearning is to become
>
> Like him, to shine in his light.

Herman Hesse's The Journey to the East and Siddhartha and Somerset Maugham's The Razor's Edge were hailed by the western world as the epoch-making novels that sold million of copies and enamoured the entire age with magic and mystery of the east. Hesse's life and art were rife with multiple self divisions, his writings of the 1920s are marked more than ever by the acute clash, to use Yeats's term, of fundamental antinomies-intellect and instinct, art and life, youth and age, male and female, despair and hope, time and timelessness, outsider and bourgeois-that he struggled to shape into coherent contrapuntal pattern. Desai exposes Matteo to a state of dichotomy between the spiritual and the natural that continues to oscillate him in a state of indeterminacy. The narrative juxtaposes the past with the present, Matteo is introduced in the reminiscences of Sophie. The news of his illness brings her back to India.

> She was taken up the stairs to the upper floor and shown into the room where he lay on an iron cot, clothed only in pyjamas and the upper half of the body emaciated and moist with perspiration. Sophie thought he must be dying. (Desai 1996: 1)

Matteo's sense of alienation has been traced back to his infancy always in a hurry like a hare chased by unseen sounds. Not attached to either of his parents, "He stared at both of them and felt they repelled him equally. It seemed painful that they should be related."

His story takes up the whole first volume of the novel blending the past and the present. Sophie's view of Matteo makes us see him, understand him and that renders her a position of an "eiron" who has watched Matteo's aspirations, cooperated with him and suffered his consummate dedication to the Mother.

> All you wanted was the mother; she reminded him passionately, You told me that. You said you needed the Mother not me, not the children.

Matteo's early adolescence flashes across the narrative invoking the period when Fabian, an English tutor introduces him to Herman Hesse's The Journey to the East. The over possessive, intrusive mother overhears the following that makes no sense to her.

Is it that from some bright sphere
We part with friends we meet with here,
Or do we see the future pass
Across the present's dusky glass?

Or what is it that makes us seem
To pick up fragments of a dream
Part of which comes true, and part
Beats and trembles in the heart?

What is the source of exultation to Matteo and Fabian leaves the mother aghast. Following the guide book, Matteo, in the company of Fabian roams across the mountains, lakes, across architectures and histories of the past but what engages him most is Fabian's reading of Hesse's The Journey to the East and also Siddhartha. The company of books catalyze the dormant longing in Matteo for the vision, which was still unknown and distant. Therefore the prospects of going into banking at Turin or the silk business in Como are of no interest to him.

Initially in 1975, marriage with Sophie promises Matteo the hopes for enlightenment in togetherness. The description at the outset however anticipates the ironic outcome of this union, "Only Sophie still wore her hair very short and Matteo 'was growing his long". In their moments of departure to India, "in Matteo's pocket was the copy Fabian had left him of Hesse's The Journey to the East". Like his predecessors, the "flower children," Matteo's attire is in conformity to his spiritual yearning: faded/ torn kurta, pyjama and chappal, like hordes of other Whites, he visits holy places. Clubbing with Sadhus, the holy men, visiting temples, worshipping icons do not as yet lead him anywhere. Visits to Ashramas and Yogis continue to confuse him until he meets the Mother. Her photograph inspires him with eternal bliss. When he watches her rapturously speaking about the Divine Light, he now discovers that "any time spent away from the Mother, without her, was wasted time, empty time, dead ... in the mother's presence, he and everything else came alive." And yet each moment of ecstatic joy would be alternated by the moment of self-doubt.

The growing differences between the couple, Sophie and Matteo, becomes irreparable. Sophie's role as an ironic observer debunks and undermines Matteo's endeavour for total devotion and faith. Nurtured in Christian faith, trained to take the Manichean view, Sophie's sceptic mind refuses to assign with the Mother the sainthood after knowing the

Mother's past. Though Matteo tells her: "You should never ask questions about a Sadhu's past. They bury their past and are reborn when they take initiation." Sophie impudently argues:

> "Ah, so-she was born, or reborn, the Mother of the ashram, and that's all there is to it, is it?" Sophie mocked. "But what if I told you what I've heard? What if I tell you she was once a dancer, that she came to India with a dance troupe. The dance tour went to pieces-I suppose the manager ran off with the money instead of booking halls or printing posters, isn't that what they always do? So, then there she was, on the lonesome, looking for a rich somebody to pick her up. In agitation, Matteo stammered,

"The Mother may have been a dancer, when she was young-I know that myself ... but no one, no one has ever said the Master the Mother's Guru was one. I know because I am printing all the literature about him."

Most of their conversation would end up on "Enough nonsense, Sophie." "Is that nonsense or a fact? Why isn't one allowed to discuss facts here?" Matteo's quest for calm rootedness and spiritual elevation could not be fulfilled since setting a high goal called for paying a high price. His distractions and the rift with Sophie make him grudge his state of being misunderstood and impair his will. His renunciation remains fraught with uncertainties, because his desires are at loggerheads with his frail will. Mind alone is the cause of all bondage; the mind is also the instrument of man's liberation. One may draw from Matteo's story that faith gives us the possibility of seeing the invisible, believing in the incredible and receiving the impossible, but faith calls for the strength of will. Laila's spiritual odyssey makes her traverse through a gamut of cultures: Islamic, Christian and Hindu across oceans and exotic landscapes. In portraying her, Desai identifies the restless yearning of those sensitive souls who live under the same sky as others but see different horizons, as the epigraph of the novel conveys:

> Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind. To arrive there
> is your ultimate goal.

Journey to Ithaca breaks away from the traditional treatment of the themes of east-west encounter. Unlike them, it does not comply with a usually demeaning image of India with the idea of bolstering the white man's burden or a civilizing mission. Laila's encounter with India attains a mythical dimension 'a rite of passage,' in a sensitive tale of initiation, experience and the process of seeking enlightenment. Her readiness to know and experience the unfamiliar lend her a nimble mind, kill her prejudices.

She comes across moments in her journey when she is on the verge of losing herself but she travels across and beyond such phases to find herself. Like the legends of Buddhist monks, who used to be vagabonds because they believed in wakefulness, Laila would come to a visionary's state in her consummate awakening. Laila's odyssey, "her experiments with appearance and reality," tend to communicate to us her narrator's curious findings into the realm of spirituality. Obviously, Laila's journey from Egypt, France, Venice to America and finally ending in India draws its specific details from her narrator's travels and sojourns and then "home coming."

Born in an agnostic and academic family in Alexandria, Laila's parents are teachers. But curiously, she is not interested in the dogmatic modes of pursuing knowledge, much to the worry of her parents. She is her own mistress and does what she likes which causes concern to her parents. She would roam about as a child and when asked where she was, she would say, "I don't know myself. I go down the street, 1 turn a corner-I don't know where I am." When her mother asked what did she do, strange was her answer, "'Do? 1 do nothing .... I walk, I play, I look. But I do nothing.'" (Desai 1996:188) She is sent to Cairo for schooling. There she comes in contact with Muslim girls and although she is not much interested in institutionalised religion, yet she joins Koran classes. Instead of joining Westernised girls, she prefers to make friends with a single devout Muslim girl Fatima, and with her goes to the Mullah who teaches recitation of Koran. She wondered about Fatima, "What was this creature, a good Muslim? It had never ventured into her parent's agnostic, academic home." The Koran class was different from the French classes where pupils took the liberty of giggling and winking: "No one took such liberties with the Mullah. The girls kept their eyes to the written page ... and Laila saw a way of learning that had no opening to debate, discussion, doubt or argument as it had been in her parent's home. Here was a book, a subject a doctrine that did not allow questioning. It was powerful and authoritative in a strange and inexplicable way; it pleased her even as it puzzled."

From Cairo, she is sent to Paris to live with her aunt for study. But here too, she finds herself out of place in the prim and proper household of the affluent. She hates the discipline of the house and behaves in her own defiant wayward manner to the chagrin of Aunt Francoise. She would live slovenly and in an "uncivilised" way and was called a "savage" by the aunt. She declares that she wouldn't eat meat and when insisted upon by the aunt, she bursts out: "I am a vegetarian. No one will make me eat the flesh of slaughtered animals. Do you know what you are eating? Have you been into a butcher's shop to see it when it is raw?" In Paris she loses interest in French literature. "Even if Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Musset had invited them into this world once, the invitation had lost its warmth, leaving nothing, not even a scrap." She preferred roaming in the Luxembourg Gardens and the Jardin des Plaubes where there were several animals in cages.

There she cultivated a peculiar rapport with a panther: "Reaching out one of its gigantic paws, it dangled it before her, quite gently, as if inviting her to shake hands... She began to smile, then laugh, as one might laugh at the play of a child, merging into its delight in a moment of unconsciousness, a moment when time either pauses or even moves back instead of forward .... They were the only two that existed in that enclosed world they had made.... They ambulated together, panther and girl, keeping pace, sending out messages of mutual admiration building a web between them of delicious complicity." The relationship with the animals takes suprarational dimensions later when she would communicate with them in her Ashram in India.

In Paris, she is ill-at-ease in her aunt's house. Like good Christians, they go to Church on Sunday, but Laila prefers to move about in the cathedral premises instead of attending service. When the aunt asks her to accompany them to Church, she says, "I am a seeker after truth and have given up all orthodox religions .... I find them the repositories of ignorance and suppression." It is this search that brings her to India though in a different way.

Her first exposure to India comes through the bookshop of Madame Lacan selling the books L 'Orient and L'Inde. Here she browses through Hindu classics. At first she is attracted by the statues and paintings but later graduates to serious books on Indian culture and one day opens up the Aitereya Brahman of the Rig Veda and read what would become her own life, the life of a seeker:

> There is no happiness for him who does not travel, Rohita! Thus we have heard. Living in the society of man the best man becomes a sinner. ... Therefore, wander!
>
> The feet of the wanderer are like the flowers, his soul is growing and reaping the fruit; and all his sins are destroyed by his fatigues in wandering. Therefore, wander!
>
> The fortune of him who is sitting, sits; it rises when he rises; it sleeps when he sleeps, it moves when he moves. Therefore, wander!

Initially she is fascinated by an Indian dance troupe led by Krishna and she describes it to her aunt: "it was a dance of gods." She decides to join the troupe much to the curiosity and a bit of scepticism of its leader Krishna. He doubts her suitability for the Indian dance, unlike the western opera or ballet, as it is not just the movement and music for entertainment. It is much more; it is spiritual, as Krishna says, "I have seen ballet-I have been to the opera alson It is entertainment only. Not spiritual, like the Indian dance. No spiritual side at all." Madame Lacan is in favour of the European dance for Laila, "Laila can study dance here in Paris. Paris is the centre of the dance world.

We have the ballet here, the opera also and the modern dance movement. Do you advise her to give up such fine possibilities and take up Indian dance instead?" But Laila is very sure of herself and says to Krishna, "I will not be a European dancer. I want to be an Indian dancer." But he has doubts. "So white, so small, Muslim. Egyptian. How can you be an Indian dancer?" Even though she is accepted by Krishna, Vijaya, another member of the troupe, is bitter and sarcastic. "You think you are Indian dancer now. No Indian dancer must practise from childhood. Must have training. Must know our language, understand our music. Not everybody can be Indian dancer." But nothing can deter her from her resolve to be an Indian dancer and she learns Indian dances quickly. From Paris, the troupe moves on to Venice.

In Venice, the troupe stays with the affluent Signora Durante who is a great admirer of Krishna and Indian culture. We are informed that Krishna is a Brahmin from Benaras, the holiest city in India. But Gianni, the housekeeper and chef is not impressed by the troupe. Irritated by their practice, he shouts, "Crazy! ... crazy. This house has gone mad-dancing at night when the whole of Venice lies asleep!" Ambrose, an Englishman and a friend of Signora calls on her. But his reaction is typical of colonial superciliousness. For him, it is not a great thing. He has no appreciation for Indian dance. "The Englishman did not seem to find the Indian dancer quite so wonderfully exotic as the Venetians did and the Indian dancer seemed no more enthusiastic about meeting the Englishman." Whereas Signora's Italian friends like the Peacock dance performed by Laila, Ambrose has nothing but contempt and sneers, "Oh, not that tired old peacock dance again! They can scarcely pass that off as classical, can they? Why, it's what street performers put on in India."

From Venice, the troupe goes to the USA and here comes the greatest disappointment. The sponsor Mrs. Du Best is not in New York and the troupe has a hard time. However, Jai Bhawabani of Bombay who owns Asia Bazar comes to their rescue. Their performance is arranged but the programme is thoroughly reduced and watered down to cater to the quotidian yankees. The American culture is childish in the eyes of Krishna. "This is America ... we too must become children like them."

Here clash of cultures is most telling. Herbert Moody, the agent who organises their shows has no appreciation for Indian music and dance and he condescendingly declares it to be the general opinion, not his own alone: "That music you folks play ... it just drives everyone right out of the theatre," he said flatly, "sounds like everyone of your instruments is out of tune. I'm just telling you what everyone says. No one's going to put up with that, or pay good money. Do something about it."

> "About the music of my country? You are asking me to create a music for American ears instead? To throwaway my own heritage?"
>
> "Yeah, at least. While you're dancing for us," Mr. Moody said, without a bit of sympathy.

But Krishna reconciles with the situation in order to survive. The troupe tastes another case of racial discrimination and white superiority at Holyoke where at a cheap boarding house, the proprietress says grace before dinner, "And may our visitors from the dark lands see the light and give up their pagan ways to follow thy path, O Lord." By the end of the troupe's sojourn in America, Mrs. Du Best appears who "always meant to go (to India) and have never been." Krishna says that she does not have the courage to go to India but Laila, now Lila, has. Lila is so committed and devoted to Indian culture that Krishna says, "India has always been her home. She has never been there, you are right, but it is where her soul was born. Her soul is waiting for her in India."

From the India of her imagination, Laila comes to the real India. On the way she is "travelling eastwards to meet the great Sun, the great light. I must prepare my soul for the sweet union... O mysterious India, I can feel you stirring in the dark." But the real India is not what she had imagined. When she visits the Mahalakshmi Temple in Bombay, she is not impressed at all. She is not after institutionalised religion or rituals:

> This is not where I will worship-I cannot be made to worship what I do not believe. The truth is elsewhere. My search is not over. I must continue it where is my Lord whose calm face shines only with the pure light of truth?

Her fascination for dance too is over. When Krishna tries to convince her that dance is worship, she retorts. "You have shown me devotion to worldly success, to financial gain, to fame not to the true light for which I came." Lila is hospitalised in a Missionary Hospital where a nurse, Mary, gives her a crucifix to make her feel better, but she throws it away,

> Do not give me that, Mary. Never give me what is so ugly and so sad. Do you think I need to have an image of sin and suffering? Take it away. I want joy and beauty and love.... I am no sinner. My dwelling place is not in sin and suffering but in truth and beauty.

From Bombay she goes on a pilgrimage with Vijaya's family. She thinks about India and what she wanted from her: "what I wanted of India was the outward manifestation of what already existed inside me, what had been growing inside me like a flower grown from a seed I had discovered in a Paris bookshop of my past." Seeing an ascetic sitting serenely under the holy banyan tree, the tree of eternity, she feels the great desire that she had always had "ever since I was a child, to be free of this world and escape into another, a better and brighter." She reaches moments of revelation, a very personal mystic experience of union with the Lord, reminding us of Tagore's Gitanjali. In her Guru, she finds her Ithaca and in him she realises 'Him': "Here I dwell now where I was always meant to dwell and where I resolve to live, never leaving His side. His true Devotee and lover:"

Laila's spiritual journey has nothing to do with religious rituals or orthodox religion. She begins to discover that a personal realisation of oneself can only come from one's inner consciousness. As a Mother, she tries to clear the vision of Matteo. His faith can bear fruit only when he perceives the things from his mind's eyes. The many sidedness of Indian religious tradition being Dharmic is truly beyond the theist and atheist categories. Its plurality and polycentric nature congenially embrace the whole world and all its beings where trees, rivers, animals and the stones inhere the cosmic spirit. In this Indian worldview, everything-Charachara-is a cosmic entity. Unlike the West, with no sovereign sense of evil, the most feared are also respected and worshipped, as the snake on the festival of "Nag Panchami." Man's kinship with the world of nature proceeds from the Karmic theory of rebirth; one may be born as an animal, insect, plant or a stone according to one's past karma.

In describing Lila's growth from Laila, Desai seems to be restoring or trying to understand her own Indian self. The awesome expansion of Laila/Lila's spiritual consciousness discloses the narrator's submission to the prospects of genuine contact with the spiritual India not just for a cosmopolitan insider but an outsider also. Her protagonist Laila's questing spirit experiments with multiple cultures, practices and beliefs in an untheorised space and finds that while the truth was ever new, ever changing, elusive and unfixable, India, her Ithaca could be a living Sanatana, home of enlightenment, where she could after all find herself. Laila transcends the earthly time and space and in the sense Aurobindo visualised, she discovers the stairs of ascent and transformation and in her profound quest reaches the state of tranquil harmony with the Supreme Light-Guru unto herself. She has attained the status of the Mother who embodies the knowledge that the soul progresses from individual to community, from community to universe and from universe to infinity. True religion is the fulfilment of our nature.

In the principal matrix of Uma' story in Fasting, Feasting, Desai records the stories of several feminine lives and draws almost a history of women's existence in the middle class India. In the second part of the novel, the frame of reference extends to draw the portrait of two American women Mrs. Patton and Melanie. What is made out to be visible is the fact that feminine lives across cultures are determined by the symbolic order of male culture.

Uma and Anamika, like their variations in Cry, the Peacock, Clear Light of the Day and Voices in the City, evoke a young girl's growth to womanhood in the process of anxious self-denial and social castration. Uma and Anamika's vulnerability make them a female underdog; heckled and pushed by the dominant, punitive patriarchal processes, their defiance fails miserably. Helen Cixous sees such a situation as the outcome of "the politics of self congratulatory parental, conjugal phallocentrism". Desai describes in vivid details what was kept hushed up-the histories of female exploitation. The narrative incisively penetrates into the essential loneliness of female adolescence and the years of growth.

Fasting, Feasting clubs two social contexts together. Within the larger framework of the lives of Mama Papa and Uma, Arun's sojourn to the United States directs the story to the Patton family. And yet the novel does not reflect the pretensions of east-west encounter as much as it illumines the lives of women across the east and the west. One would read in wider canvas of the novel the visuals of "great" Indian middle class; its aspirations, pretensions, values. The narrative takes a satirical overtone in the description:

> A meat diet had been one of the reactionary changes brought about in his life, and his Papa's brother's by their education. Raised amongst traditional vegetarians, their eyes had been opened to the benefits of meat along with cricket and the English language: the three were linked inextricably in their minds. They had even succeeded in convincing the wives they married of this novel concept of progress, and passed it on to their children. Papa was always scornful of those of their relatives who came to visit and insisted on clinging to their cereal and vegetable-eating ways, shying away from the meat dishes Papa insisted on having cooked for dinner. (Desai 2000: 32-33)

Uma, the plain, unmarried daughter is trapped at home, smothered by her overbearing parents and their double standards. Her story gains momentum when Mama Papa decide not to send her to the school so that their only male child could get proper attention and care. Mama is a perfect other half of Papa, totally enamoured of him and therefore any prospect of her evolving a bonding with her daughter Uma is nipped in the bud. The following description lets us trace the reasons of Uma's oppression: the so-called collusion of the mother in perpetuating, rallying, supporting male oppression of woman:

When visitors came and enquired after their health, one of them would reply in the first and sometimes third person singular, but the answer was made on behalf of both of them. If Papa gives his opinion of their local member of parliament or the chances of the government in the next election, Mama said nothing because he had spoken for her too.... Their opinions differed so rarely that if Mama refused to let Aruna wear a pearl necklace to the matinee at the Regal Cinema or Papa decided Uma could not take music lessons after school, there was no point in appealing to the other parent for a different verdict: none was expected or given.

Mama is a stereotypical product of male chauvinism who subscribes to the rules made by men. The consummate bonding of Mama Papa definitely affects Uma's future adversely. Around her years of growth lurked a confused knowledge of the secret nature of female sexuality. The cohabiting parents in their hypocritical ways kept their sexual relationship a matter of "open secret," planting a sense of shame in the daughter's mind:

> No doors were ever shut in their household: closed doors meant secrets, nasty secrets, impermissible. It meant authority would come stalking in and make a search to seize upon the nastiness, the unclean blot. Unclean with human blood. Woman's blood. But when it came to parents, one did not look. One looked down at oneself, ashamed.

The birth of a son, Arun, to Mama and Papa laid a huge burden on innocent, clumsy, undependable Uma. Her music lessons were stopped, so was her schooling. "We are not sending you back to school, Uma. You are staying at home to help with Arun."

School life to Uma was associated with the prospects of wholesome relationship, of purity, harmony, order, that the slovenly routine of drudgery fraught with double standards at home did not allow:

> The visible details would have sounded banal: the strict rules of the morning assembly to which the girls were not admitted unless they had been examined at the door to see if their shoes were polished, their fingernails short and without paint, the ribbons on their hair white and not coloured; then the piano on which sister Teresa banged out the hymns the wonderfully still and composed figure of Mother Agnes holding the prayer book from which she read in her deep unhurried voice that seemed to move between the girls like a slow brown river; the orderliness of her office room to which Uma was fairly frequently sent with a note from the teacher and where she looked around avidly, at the picture on

> the wall of a golden-haired Jesus holding a lamb, the tinted print over the mantelpiece of the tear-stained face of a child gazing up at a corner of the gilt frame where a silver star stone, or the polished brass vase with its spray of stiff fresh flowers on the desk and the clean white linen runners on top of the bookshelf, the immense clock near the door immensely ticking, and the view from the window of a garden of marvellous tidiness, the long verandas enclosing a courtyard that they could look on but not jump into because the grass was so precious and the roses so rare.

The images of her school so vividly lodged in her mind create an intense desolation of spirit-the thought that she would no longer be a part of the school is unbearable. Everything about the school was a cherished part of her existence though she was not a bright student and that gave Mama solid reason to deny schooling to her, "You know you failed your exams again. You're not being moved up. What's the use of going back to school? Stay at home and look after your baby brother."

Abounding in irony, Desai's narration takes ample opportunity to describe a subsequent event. Uma's frantic hope that a personal meeting and entreaty to the Mother would help her seek Mother's intervention in the matter of restoring her schooling fails miserably:

> 'Hmm, hmm,' she said listening to Uma's sobs. 'Yes your father her wro me-I know. He says that because you have failed once again'.

Then in utter despair, when the communication failed, she yelled and howled, the mother grew more hardened and detached. When she gabbled about the baby, not knowing how to bathe the baby, about being afraid to pin on his nappy, the Mother grew impatient: "Girls have to learn these things too, you know." Uma was thunderstruck and the ironies multiplied when the Mother took out from her drawer a picture of infant Jesus sitting on the lap of Virgin Mary. The episode grew bizarre when, in utter desperation, Uma's frenzied cries turned into a fit of hysterics and fainting, she was brought up back home by the school van. The scene signifies that in a situation when a woman's loneliness injures her natural/rational ability to' express her emotions, her illness gives her away. What is also worthy of observation here is that the parents's perception of their children inevitably affects persons outside the family. The contempt and levity with which Mama Papa describe Uma has already set the process of her social inferiorisation. Quite a few readers have expressed their wrath at Desai's "misrepresentation" of an Indian family, however, a candid, honest rear view of an average middle-class Indian family during the 1960s and 80s could drive home the truth telling project of the narrator in unmasking the pretensions of the middle class virtues and indicting its sexist and chauvinistic bias.

Life changes, time passes; Uma is reconciled to rearing little Arun:

> She (Mama) watched over him like a dragon, determined that fixed quantity of milk was poured down his gullet whether he wanted or not and later the prescribed boiled eggs and meat both. Then when Papa returned from the office he would demand to know how much his son has consumed and answer had to be given: it had to be precise and it had to be one that pleased.

In Mira Masi's rituals, vegetarianism and deep spiritual faith, Uma sees alternative modes of coping with the travails of existence. In the given world where women have limited choices and sometimes no choice at all, Mira Masi, a child widow, at least chooses her responses or feelings. In her devotion she chooses the possibility of Ananda. At the temple, she seeks bliss in her deep faith in the divine: "O blow the conch/Light the incense,/As the lord. Holding fire in his hand,/Dances to the sound of the drum,/On the burning ground" (58). Uma knows however that this experience of bliss is not gained by asking for it. Mira Masi, in her moments of sublime imaginings, rises above the mundane desires, in her free abandonment. Uma however is not so blessed, her own life she realises "to have been full of barks, howls, messages and now silence." Uma's gentleness and sensitivity however does not die down despite the fact that she is not allowed to live life on her terms. The narrative reveals her reaction to the dying pigeon shot by the air gun of Dinesh, Aruna's son. She beholds the pain of the bird in images of an artist. In a ritual dip with Mira Masi, her almost drowning could be sensed as the subconscious desire to merge with the elements of nature to die.

Uma meets with another jolt of betrayal in her marriage which turns out to be a farce. Her parents, taking recourse to the matrimonial advertisement, get her married to Harish, much senior to her in age. The fraudulent nature of the marriage is very soon exposed. Harish was already married having four children. His marriage to Uma was motivated by financial expediency. Instead of an escape, she is further trapped in ignominy and her miseries do not end because her parents would not allow her to become self-reliant. The offer to supervise a nurse's hostel of Dr. Datta is dismissed with contempt: "She (Mama) said, 'As long as we are here to provide for her she will never need to go to work.' But she works all the time! Dr. Dutt exclaimed on a rather sharp note, 'At home.'

Anamika's situation is no better than Uma. She is born and brought up in Bombay and has won the scholarship to the Oxford University but her parents cash in on the letter to get her a husband. After her marriage, she receives regular thrashing by her mother-in-law and that causes her miscarriage:

> Anamika had been beaten, Anamika was beaten regularly by her mother-in-law while her husband stood by and approved or, at least did not object. Anamika spent her entire time in kitchen, cooking for his [husband's] family which was large so that meals

> were eaten in shifts-first the men, then the children, finally the women. She herself ate the remains in the pots before scouring them (or did Uma and Aruna imagine this last detail?). If the pots were not properly scoured ... her mother-in-law threw them on the ground and made her do them all over again.... Anamika had never once been out alone with her husband. Aruna wondered what she did with all the fine clothes and jewellery she had been given at her wedding.

One of the most self-contained segments of the novel is the episode of Uma's outing. Desai's caustic sense of humour and pathos invests this scene with the entertainment value for the readers. Mama and Papa appear as grotesque caricatures-the vamp and villain in a Cinderella story. The narrative gives away an uncanny knowledge of the trapped, arrested longings of a plain girl next door, the longing for attention, for romantic escape. Could one's heart block the sprouting of desire? Uma, the handicapped young girl strikes immediate bonding with Ramu, Bakul uncle's son. Uma suffers at times with fits-not conspicuously visible, but Ramu has "a club foot and wears an orthopaedic boot to steady him so he clomps across the terrace towards them. The bag weighs him down at one arm so his progress is slow". The young pair of cousins feel at home in each other's company. Some dramatic scenes describe how once in her lifetime Ramu's company provides Uma with magical moments despite her parents' resentment.

> 'I'll take you out to dinner,' he offers grandly, throwing out an arm in invitation.
>
> Papa and Mama's mouth fall open-their lips and tongues look white. Uma squeaks. To dinner? in utter disbelief.
>
> 'Yes, can't one get dinner anywhere in the city? There must be a restaurant'.
>
> 'There's Kwality's!' Uma cries suddenly, making her parents turn their faces from Ramu to her without altering their thunderstruck expressions: What could

> she be thinking of, suggesting dinner in a restaurant? She has never been to one in her life; how can she think of starting now when her hair is already grey.
>
> Then Papa gathers himself together. It is up to him to prevent this situation from getting completely out of control.
>
> 'No need to waste money by eating at Kwality's,' he says sternly. 'No need. Waste! Kwality's-bah!'
>
> 'Dinner has been prepared at home,' Mama adds, also coming to life.
>
> 'No, no, we must eat out. I insist. I will take Uma out to dinner. The best dinner we can get in this city. Isn't there an hotel, with a bar?'

These dramatic scenes of Mama and Papa, Ramu and Uma make us gather the repressive attitude of Uma's parents. With Ramu, however, she enjoys equilibrium and harmony:

> 'Oh Ramu-bhai,' she hiccups, 'You are so-o fun-ee.'
>
> 'I am so funee,' he sings the line improvising to the tune of 'My Darling Clementine.' 'I am a bunnee.'
>
> 'Ramu!' Uma squeals, spluttering into her glass.
>
> 'Hop, hop, hop!' warbles Ramu,... making his fingers dance backwards, 'Funny bunny, funny bunny.'
>
> Uma is choking with laughter. She has laughed so much, she has tears in her eyes.

Togetherness with Ramu suffuses Uma's life with giggles, songs and dances of joy. The moments are shortlived, but in those moments for the first time she gets a sense of her own self that dared to dream. Uma is punished for the freedom she allowed to herself: 'I had shandy to drink, Mama-and the band playedand Ramu and I danced'/ 'Quiet, you hussy! Not another word from you, you idiot.... You disgrace to the family nothing but disgrace, ever!'. Anamika reminds us of Monisha in Voices in the City, both described in the images of chain and torpor suffocate all their life. Anamika ultimately commits suicide by self-immolation as presented by the family. It is suspected that Anamika is burnt, as reported by neighbours, by her mother-in-law in collusion with her son. In cold, casual, understatement, the narrative drives home the menace of the crime which is a part of Indian cultural practice.

> What the husband said was that he had been away on a business trip and returned only that afternoon on hearing the news.
>
> What the mother-in-law said was that she always had Anamika sleep beside her, in her own room, as if she were a daughter, her own child. Only that night Anamika had insisted on sleeping in her own room. She must have planned it, plotted it all.
>
> What Anamika's family said was that it was fate, God had willed it and it was Anamika's destiny.
>
> What Uma said was nothing.

What is more sinister is the resigned acceptance of such events of cruelty as destiny. Anamika's story is strongly reminiscent of Anjana Appachana's "Incantation" (1998) that interrogates the blind conventions imbedded in Indian cultural practices placing women in destructive power-relationship with the patriarchy. The tragic end in both the stories is attributed to "Karma".

Arun has had a pampered childhood, his having grown as a vegetarian however causes his parents discontent. In order to fulfil the aspiration of his parents, he is sent to Massachusetts in the U.S. Arun has to vacate the dorm for the summer holidays and he needs to find a family to stay as a paying guest. His relationship to the Pattons, his host, reveals the contrast and parallels in the east and west. The narrative, further honed and chiselled, portrays the American society, the plenty and abundance: "carefully constructed gardens, the small beds of bright flowers, stone edged and stranded in huge stretches of immaculate lawn, the clipped hedges, the bird-feeders." The family of the Pattons however is the mirror of American life. Arun senses in each member a self-centred isolation. Their lives are mechanical. Mr. Patton must bring large chunks of beef to barb-e-que every evening for dinner whether needed or not; Mrs. Patton must go out shopping and stock her already overstuffed refrigerator and freezer with more and more; their son Rod must jog daily and sweat it out, while Melanie, their daughter remains deeply affected by bulimia, devours chocolates and then vomits. Psychiatry regards anorexia and bulimia as behavioural symptoms and traces the cause to extremely stressful childhood. Melanie's irritability and withdrawal are misunderstood by Pattons, though Arun finds it appalling; a cause of serious concern:

In the morning he finds Melanie seated at the kitchen table, her chin lowered to her chest while her mother talks to her.

> 'Daddy thinks you ought to go outdoors and play games, Melanie,' Mrs. Patton says as she cooks eggs, 'You have such a bad colour. You're not sick, are you dear?' Melanie does not raise her chin or answer.
>
> Arun, finding it too late to retreat, tries to pour himself some milk and cereal as quietly and unobtrusively as he can.... Melanie's face across the table looks like a blotting paper that has soaked up as much water as it can hold: it is blotchy and discoloured; it saps. Does Mrs. Patton not see?

Arun observes that his parents in India were not sharply different from the Pattons. Even they fail to understand their children. Each individual lives in his own world, there is no genuine exchange of feelings. Desai employs Arun as a reflector to cast her aspersion on the insensitivity of the two families: the Mamapapa's and the Pattons. Two attitudes, two behaviours; one of the west, the other of the east; one American, the other Indian; the Patton's total blindness to Melanie's deteriorating condition; the over possessiveness and extreme dictatorship of Arun's parents. If family as an institution is a source of love and nurturance, it could also be an oppressive and hideous institution:

> Even in Mr. Patton, Arun saw a reflection of his own father: "he reacted by not reacting, as if he had simply not heard, or understood." . . . Mr. Patton somehow had the same expression, authoritarian and resentful, to forestall any opposition to his and stonily waited for it to peter out and disappear. "Once again, its grey vaporous chill crept into his life, like Asthma."

Melanie has to be hospitalised. Arun could perceive in the situation an analogue of his own family situation, remembering the helpless struggle of Uma against a hardened authority of the family:

> Arun does see a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths' in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here. Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty.

Arun's diasporic experience makes him see his own self, his people back in India with greater awareness. It is the defamiliarised distance that hones his perception and bestows him with a sense of right and wrong. The materialistic culture of the U.S., he is afflicted with inexplicable vacancy. Fads may preoccupy them temporarily: shopping, sunbathing, vegetarianism or Yoga. He could escape the nastiness, the stupidity of home, but what is replaced is hardly what he genuinely craved for:

> No he had not escaped. He had travelled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known at home; not the real thing which was plain, unbeautiful misshapen; fraught and compromised, but the unreal thing dean, bright, gleaming without taste, savour or nourishment.

At the core of social familial gatherings .hedonistic go-getting in India or in the West, Desai discerns artificiality, emotional void and pathetic aloneness. The long historical insistence on the otherness of woman her core of feminine mystery makes woman (a beautiful woman) the natural focus of an art. Literature may particularly be seen as histories of beautiful, desirable women, where ordinary or not so beautiful woman is seemingly an exception, without any friend, while beautiful woman is always the subject of male gaze and perennial attention. Desai's narrative fights for the rights of Uma in debunking or subverting the values of patriarchy, Uma's secret desire for self-fulfilment are by no means measured in terms of right or wrong, but as her basic birthright.

Desai's woman seeks freedom not from femininity, but from the blind and dead conventions, the cunning expediency of domestic-familial institution that reduce her to a commodity. Uma may be overtly submissive but her real self is recalcitrant, frantically seeking freedom. In a situation when the society perpetually administers its gravitating influence and grip over the despairing self, enmeshed in the muddled up intricate social texture, Desai describes the struggle of the individual for self-worth and if it is not possible then for escape. 'It is the drama of the struggling, faltering self facing the terror of single-handed ferocious assaults of existence" that grip Desai's imagination. Like all other stories of Desai, Fasting, Feasting testifies to its narrator's immense sympathy and emotional identification with the lives very distant from her own. The narrative chimes in with the vernacular of an extrovert milieu to make us behold the profound solitude of resisting, compromising, suffering, decaying. In the most traumatised, crushed bodies and minds, we read volcanic desires. The mundane social realism infusing the narrative manages to communicate the muffled tragedy of feminine lives in spite of her withering ageing body, Uma's mind's eyes could see, remember and inscribe the history of several lives suffered and lived in anonymity.

6

Travelogue Novel of Desai

Travel literature is travel writing of literary value. Travel literature typically records the experiences of an author touring a place for the pleasure of travel. An individual work is sometimes called a travelogue or itinerary. Travel literature may be cross-cultural or transnational in focus, or may involve travel to different regions within the same country. Accounts of spaceflight may also be considered travel literature.

Literary travelogues generally exhibit a coherent narrative or aesthetic beyond the logging of dates and events as found in travel journals or a ship's log. Travel literature is closely associated with outdoor literature and the genres often overlap with no definite boundaries. Another sub-genre, invented in the 19th century, is the guide book.

Fictional travelogues make up a large proportion of travel literature. Although it may be desirable in some contexts to distinguish fictional from non-fictional works, such distinctions have proved notoriously difficult to make in practice, as in the famous instance of the travel writings of Marco Polo or John Mandeville. Many "fictional" works of travel literature are based on factual journeys – Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and presumably, Homer's Odyssey (c. 8th cent. BCE) while other works, though based on imaginary and even highly fantastic journeys, Dante's Divine Comedy, Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, Voltaire's Candide or Samuel Johnson's The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia, nevertheless contain factual elements.

Jack Kerouac's On the Road (1957) and The Dharma Bums (1958) are fictionalised accounts of his travels across the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s. One contemporary example of a real life journey transformed into a work of fiction is travel writer Kira Salak's novel, The White Mary, which takes place in Papua New Guinea and the Congo and is largely based on her own experiences in those countries.

Anita Desai off and on traverses across familiar Indian milieu. Her recent novel, The Zigzag Way (2005) is set in Mexico, the city with over a million people, a large Latin American republic ruled by Spain from 1521 to 1822. Aztec and other ruins recall its Indian past. Most Mexicans are descended from the Indians and Spaniards. Much of the mountainous landscape stretches across the country. Two main Sierra Madre ranges enclose a fertile plateau where most Mexicans live.

The pages of the novel weld a young American would be writer Eric's journey with the history of silver mining, genealogy of characters, formation of Mexican culture through the centuries of migrations, revolutions, wars, Cornish migration into Mexico, personal histories, rituals, cultural practices, beliefs, realism and fantasy linking Mexico with Cornwall, New England and Vienna in kaleidoscopic images. Mexico has perennially fascinated anthropologists, writers, poets, travellers, filmmakers for its "Otherness." Scores of stories transcribe the social revolution afflicting Mexico. The emptiness, decadence and corruption of postrevolution Mexico where people sought gratification in sadism, violence, sex and death figure as dominant themes in Katherine Anne Porter's stories, "Hacienda," "Maria Conception," "Flowering Judas" and also in the sub-plots of novel Ship of Fools (1960).

D.H. Lawrence and Graham Greene's accounts of Mexico seem saturated with reference to several rebellions and civil wars, gory secrets of love, lust, mystery and pathos. Stunning picturesque beauty of Mexican landscape, its hacienda, silver mines, its highest peak, Volcano Citlatepetl, Huichols, Zarzuela Circus Company to "Mexican Wave" (the football ceremony) invest Mexico city with magic.

The Zigzag Way, a metaphor for the winding path followed by Indian miners to enter the pits from outside is a labyrinth that Eric treads to discover his past. Eric's journey takes him to Dona Vera, a grande dame surrounded by acolytes and snappy pug dogs, inhabiting the imposingly gotllic Hacienda de la Soledad, and this contact releases in his mind half-remembered stories, told in his childhood in Cornwall, England. Tales of mining available in the library of Dona Vera in exotic places of hardships make him have elegiac visions of the loss and deprivation of his ancestors in the midst of the turbulence of revolution. The archives and travelogues and also the uncanny revelations, "Shaman-vision-dream-trance-ecstasy" (Desai, 2005: 49), connect Eric with his dead grandmother, Betty Jennings. Images of zigzag ways, chequered lives, labyrinths, tunnels and dungeons abound in Eric's illusions and experiences. The keynote of the text resonates with the sense of dread:

> But now that he was following the trail of his own history, tunneling his way back into his ancestry, and the history of his ancestors, he felt for the first time the urgency-and the terror-of knowing.

Desai's narrative reveals deep affinity with the European gothic. Eric's story / travelogue proceeds to unfold what Allen Gardner (1989: 13) emphasises as the characteristics of the gothic:

> Indeterminacy becomes a feature of the settings, stressing darkness, incomprehensibly winding passages, subterranean rooms, or caves in castles or monasteries. Enigma is actualised in plots which foreground the puzzle, and dramatised in the curiosity of the hero/heroine or the withholding of information by those who are 'in the know.' Hope and dread are made explicit in the hope of love, and the fear of betrayal,

or more brutally, lust and the representation of sexual abuse, torture and death.

Bespectacled, scholarly, misfit Eric, arrived from Harvard, is reminiscent of the 'outsiders' of Desai, particularly Matteo in Journey to Ithaca. Matteo is enthralled by the poetry of Herman Hesse in The Journey to the East. Eric's spirit seeks inspiration from the lines of Elizabeth Bishop that appear as the epigraph of the novel:

> Oh tourist, is this how this country is going to answer
> you and your immodest demands for a different world,
> and a better life, and complete comprehension of both
> at last, and immediately. (Arrival at Santos, 1952)

Emily, Eric's girlfriend's research project is to take her to Mexico. Her field was the forests of Yucatan where mosquitoes teemed and malaria was rife. The would be writer within Eric prods him to accompany her in this journey with the hope that Mexico will yield the impetus he is lacking, energise him with a new self-confidence and push him out of his comfort zones.

Eric's contrast with Emily is of special significance to the narrative. In an ambivalent relationship with Em, scenes and sights that are of no interest to Em, draw Eric. Desai 'describes this as the " disjointedness of their joint experiences:

> Eric found himself distracted by everything in the airport-the Kiosks displaying textiles bright with rainbow stripes and rainbow flowers, tequila bottles shaped like cacti sweets made out of cacti and fruit, and the arrivals hall which was swamped by more people with black hair and brown skin than he had ever encountered before, families embracing and weeping and laughing as if they lived their lives on the level of grand opera. Outside, he was faced with light that struck more whitely, electrically than he had ever seen on to a spectrum of colour unknown in Boston, Massachusetts-flatroofed houses with pink and orange and violet walls, pea-green taxis and leaf green buses. When they reached the hotel where the tranquillising

> effect of splashing water in marble fountains was cancelled by the shrieking of birds of bright plumage in tall cages, he had to lie down, he felt the blood racing in his veins too fast. Em did not appear concerned.

Probably it's the "otherness" of Eric's family that baffles Emily. Eric comes from the fishermen stock:

> Visit to Eric's family were always hasty, improvised scrambled affairs, infrequent and rarely satisfactory. Em, who came from a solid phalanx of doctors, dentists and surgeons in Philadelphia and its environs, so that her own choice of a medical profession seemed not only logical but inevitable, never could find such a link between the Eric she knew and his family which was, effectively, his mother's side of it.

She perceives the visible strength of Eric's matrilineage: "It was his mother who had, in her direct and practical way, dealt with the problem of having a son who is misfit for a son, this pale, frail scholar within a class of hearty Maine fisher folk. Eric's father ... accepted the blame, as an Englishman and an intruder on the Irish Catholic tribe." Eric, bored with routine research work is not an austere academic type, "how he could scarcely bear to look at the thesis he had written on immigration patterns in Boston in the 1960s." In spite of the generous grant, he is not inspired to work. Unlike Em who is so focussed, certain and sure immersed in her work and would not approve of Eric's languishing:

> a disapproving frown on her brow as she observed him sprawling there, idle. It would creep across her face whenever she came from a long day at the lab and found him at home, in Boston, listening to Mozart or to Schumann, with the cat Shakespeare ensconced on his lap.

Sierra Madre, whose silver mines were abandoned during the Mexican revolution in 1910-20 has been historically a site of interest to people across Europe. The excavation drew people from different ethnic groups searching for employment and wealth. Historians have accumulated extensive records of the ongoing plights of Huichol Indians, and the pre-Columbian Mexico; the difficult lives of British miners stranded far from their home in the early part of the 20th century. It is here that Eric is to discover his mores buried in mysteries. Its exotic ceremonies against the awesome ruins as well as the natural landscape, enchant him:

> Over this great field of volcanic rock from the ruins of the Aztec temples, the tricolour of Mexico whipped like a dragon in the wind from the mountains that ringed the city and were visible at the end of the avenue and street, benevolent and protective witches wrapped in dark skirts. Eric and Em were just in time to observe the ceremony of taking down the flag for the night by the platoon of toy-sized soldiers as stiff and smart as painted lead.

Mayans and Aztec designs carved in gold ornaments, guarded by police, the pavement vendors, "proffering lottery tickets, safety pins, or songbirds, in stacked cages, the zapotec women from the country who spread out their bunches of dry herbs, their shrivelled scorpions and fried grasshoppers on little mats they rolled up and made to disappear as the city police roamed up in white jeeps". Many more stunning colours, exotic shapes, sounds and gaudy, garish artifacts of Mexico strike him as so contrasted with Boston, "at the corner outside the cathedral fleshy dancers in costumes of brilliant feathers and anklets of jangling bells danced and whirled the Aztec dances for tourists with cameras purses and pesos."

Into the township of Sierra Madre, however, Eric finds that there was more to the Mexico of colour and romance, "its emptiness and petrifaction were indescribably Mexican too." But as they drew close enough in search for Dona Vera, "to make out the first range of bullet-coloured mountains, a crater suddenly opened up in the earth as if a meteor had fallen and formed it a white basin like depression appeared which had not been visible from a distance." The annual celebration of the day of the dead was approaching. As he walks along the lake, the landscape assumes Eerie forms suggestive of the stasis of soullessness, joylessness:

> Egrets and herons stood stock-still in the shallows as if they were roots or branches anchored to the clay below. Everything seemed fossilised except for the ripple of light that ran through the scene as it might in a mirage. On the other side of the lake, against the flank of the mountain, there was a long, low building of stone, on three sides surrounded by an adobe wall that blended in so perfectly with the land ... alludes to the concealed secrets that this visitation might disclose.

The exotically beautiful Dona Vera's lecture on the local Indian tribe, though delivered in Spanish, abounds in names and places that sound oddly familiar. He begins to recall stories told by his Cornish grandfather who once worked as a miner in Mexico but when he tries to talk to Dona Vera, "She is no longer the fantastically attired and theatrical creature. She had appeared earlier at the lecture, she was merely a small wiry figure in nondescript Khaki who barely stood out in that overwhelming landscape." Eric watched her as she talked to a young boy patting the horse's neck and flanks and steadying the animal "in jodhpurs and boots; her white hair tucked under a hat".

Eric notes that though she houses local Indians, she never speaks to them, "only of them." When she gathered that Eric was not interested in anthropology, in the Huichol Indian, rather a personal reason was brought him to her she becomes unenthusiastic. At the dinner table, he could watch her attired dramatically in Kimono, that conceals "layers of worn and lumpish grey flannel," unravels a chequered past having fled "not the Nazis, but her family's Nazi past, was difficult to forget notwithstanding how much she tried sloughing it off to emerge like some sly and secretive snake in its new skin."

Crowds of US University researchers chanting the pre-Columbian past and peyote-fuelled visions appear like "missionaries harvesting souls." But what drives Eric is his private quest-tracing his family's history in the ghost town of Sierra. Desai's narrative proceeds to conjure the struggles of Eric's grandparents and their community.

Now in place of the Cornish workers the native Huichol Indians suffer the cruelty of the mines. When Eric inquires into their lives, he provokes the ire of their self-appointed saviour: Dona Vera-the Queen of the Sierra who is resentful of any reference to the past history.

She "packages for the purpose of tourist interest the 'living culture': "That is my purpose, Sen—or to keep it alive. Post-Columbian Mexico". Eric gets to know that she is the Austrian wife of a mining baron whose family usurped the lands of the miners and made them slaves. In spite of her formidable authority, he ventures to tell her about his private quest:

You see my grandfather came out to Mexico to work for a mining company. He was Cornish, from a mining family, and, you see, the mines in Cornwall failed. I'm not sure of the date-it would have been the early part of the century, the tens or twenties, he felt ashamed, he knew so little ... but definitely in this area, he insisted ... because I recognised the names you mentioned in your lecture in Mexico city, the one I attended, I told you I attended. That's when I heard that you run this centre for studies of this area, so I thought 'I'd come here to see what I could find out. I heard your family too had a connection to the mines.

Even though she claimed that Eric was "misinformed," "whoever tells you this, lies', she exploded in vehement protest:

> "I am not one of those who took their land and ruined it with mining and made them slaves". "Atlists come to my centre, and scholars, and seekers. Not historians, and not, she fixed him with a fierce eye- 'not mineros!'

Eric's finding of a counter discourse: Carl Sartorius' history in Mexico and the Mexicans, however debunks Dona Vera's half-truths:

> that after the fall of the Aztec empire, the conquest of the country proceeded with wonderful rapidity, chiefly because the invaders hoped to meet with great treasure in every mountain they beheld. The manner in which the Indians were forced to labour in the mines is well known and their numbers rapidly diminished.

The narrative of reminiscences reveals the archival history of unscrupulous ownership, holding and sharing of immense wealth and opulence drawn from the mining industry:

> Even now, with Roderigo long since dead and buried in the family vault where no one visited him, ... Hacienda de la Soledad, the house at the foot of the mountain from which the silver had been extracted that made the family wealthy, wealthy enough to own this hacienda among so many others. The others however, being occupied by his mother, his aunts, his sisters and brothers-in-law nieces and nephews, uncles and cousins, had been so many extensions of the prison house in the best locality in Mexico city to which he had brought her, while the Hacienda de la Soledad was from the very first her own: no one else wanted it.

It was indeed "a graveyard of history", when she first saw the Hacienda de la Soledad, a ruin of blackened stones, fallen beams and cavernous halls ... with wind roaring like an unimpeded flood through its emptiness". This place invoked terror and fascination, she has delusions of "the panting breath of someone quite distraught," and would be suddenly interrupted by the shouts of the Chauffeur: "Come back, instantly, I beg you.... There are rattle snakes... scorpions as big as your hand, shafts you could fall through".

In Dona Vera's library, reading the Political Essay, makes Eric behold the *zig-zag* paths of the miners:

The Indian tenateros, the beasts of burden in the mines of Mexico, remain loaded with a weight of 275 to 300 pounds for a span of six hours. In the galleries of Valencia, they are exposed to temperatures of 22° to 25° (71-75°F) and during this time they ascend and descend several thousands of steps in pits of an inclination of 45°. The tenateros carry the minerals in bags made of the threads of pite. To protect their shoulders (for the mineros are generally naked to the middle) they place a woollen covering under this bag. We meet in the mine some 50 or 60 of these porters, among whom are men above sixty and boys of ten or twelve years of age. In ascending the stairs they throw their bodies forwards and rest on a staff. They walk in a zigzag direction because they have found from long experience that their respiration is less impeded when they traverse obliquely the current of air which enters the pits from without. Eric wonders: "Was this the world his grandfather had found when he crossed the ocean and sought out new territory." The leaves of the book make him know a lot more than Dona Vera ever wanted. He gets to know:

> Frequently they have to ascend a thousand or fifteen hundred feet, not by ladders but by means of the trunks of trees in which steps have been bewn. As tallow candles only are allowed in mines, the workman must shelter his light with one hand, so that the draught may not extinguish it, and have therefore only a slight bold on the other. He thus moves upward with his burthen, the trunk being slightly inclined, and secured by props every fifteen feet, the abyss on either side, into which a false step precipitates him. Indians have been known to carry up from five hundred weight in this manner, in leather sacks.

Eric's obsessive engagement with his ancestor's past keeps intersecting with the accounts of tragic irony in the life of Dona Vera, her memories of the first visit of a child Ramon to Hacienda, with bruises and thereafter her growing fascination with him: "It was the beginning of a legendary friendship, irregular and infrequent but revived over some ten years, again and again-till, abruptly it ended." The ghost of the past haunts her. The memories flash forth certain truths that only she knows-the bizarre story of Ramon's death:

> the black Coyote that hunted her down at night. She nearly broke out again into the howl she had uttered on hearing of his death-senseless, pointless, falling from a roof he was repairing in his village (so his family said, while others maintained it was in pursuit of a girl who lived nearby, and still others that it was when he was being chased by someone with a knife after a drunken brawl and that he had taken too much peyote and run out of control, but what did it matter what they said?) throwing open her arms to catch him when he fell. She had promised to take care of him-why had she not?

The narrative of magic realism, rendering Dona Vera's imaginings recalls Ben Okri's novel, The Famished Road:

> The armoire cracked open, waking her, and in the dark, Ramon the god appeared, no longer flesh, and blood but paint and mask and feathers, a wooden idol whose eyelids moved. They lifted, and the eyes that looked out were real and alive. They stared at her, lying on her bed, old and ugly and shrunken-because she too was real and alive .... Her wooden lips parted to smile-but instead of smiling they uttered a caw. The lips were beaks, painted beaks that cawed. It was not Ramon but Zopilote pretending to be Ramon, and it was leading an army of Zopilotes that was emerging from the armoire, two by two, in perfect formation. They were not flying but walking, marching, kicking out their big clawed feet and stiff booted legs that might have looked wooden if they had not also looked military.

The harrowing remnants of Dona Vera's past come sprawling in the surrealistic narrative invoking the nightmares that afflict her and we are told that "After such a night, morning could only come as a relief." Desai seems well-versed in comprehending the feminine aspects of the gothic and in her conjuring, Dona Vera becomes a potent producer of the uncanny-both as a victim and the agent-a woman who figures as a maze. Philip Frenean's "Home of Night" could aptly describe her secret terrors: "Funeral shapes, and horrid nettles grew/ ... conspiring spirits whispered in the gloom,/

half heard, the silly secrets of the tomb./ With blood the trees were all adrip."

The library had until now not witnessed a visitor who could be interested in the book of mining. Eric finds more from Carl Sartorius' book: "Frequently they have to ascend a thousand or fifteen hundred feet, not by ladders but by means of the trunks of trees." And now he gets to know the deliberately concealed and forbidden portion of Mexican past not the "packaged history of Huichol art." Driven by his search at the site of the St. Francis Church, he recognised:

> The stone tiles under his feet had been rubbed soft and uneven by centuries of shuffling footsteps, and when Eric paused, he saw the old man had finally arrived on his knees and was making genuflections in all four directions, one after the other, meticulously, while his daughter, if that was who she was, went up to the altar, to light a candle.

A kind of indistinct murmur congealed into a single, massed hum and Eric guessed it was the prayers and confessions being mumbled by all assembled in the comfortingly dark shadows.

Surrounded by the gothic spirals, dark shadows, Eric wonders:

> If all the confessions and all the penance for the world's sins were not being released here, in the murky darkness, and humming around him in an endless spiral. In the bright, bleak chapels of the north guilt and sin were not permitted, but they seemed to have gathered here for refuge and to live on an unquiet numinous and murmurous life in the unforgiving dark.

"Crepuscular and underground but also palpable" the past invoked, comes alive here. He finds himself as if in a spell, following the woman to the tray from which she had picked a candle to light. He selects two for himself, walks up to the altar and lights them from the candles already lit and flaming there. "Then stuck the first, and after that the second, into a bed of warm, melting wax, saying aloud, as he did so, his grandparent's names: 'David Rowse' 'Betty Jennings'." He finds himself taking a leap back into the history of his grandparents, Betty Jennings and David Rowse-their journey from Cornwall to Mexico. The tender love between Betty and Davey in Chapter 6 almost reads like a Mills and Boon romance.

Betty did not saif what she saw awed or frightened or enchanted her but she did, in every line (her letters home) express her trust in Davey and her joy in being with him.

Davey's day started at the mine. Like many of them he would "line up in pairs, had their names entered the mine, the voices of those who went in first spewing fainter as the ones who followed sounded louder, then fainter too, as if they were descending the past." Into the deep dungeon leading them below they would worship an image of the saint the saint of trabajadors decorated with fresh flowers, they would light candles for him, before going in different directions to start work. The pagan, atavistic rituals baffled Betty but Davey assured her that he would not take part in such rituals. Davey could not far long conceal the sinister nature of hardship the miners were subjected to. Labouring constantly in dark passages, secluded from the world, the exploitative conditions that subjugated them horrified Betty. She went on:

> 'Don't you think it is wrong? These poor people being made to make over what they earn back to the Company? By order?'
>
> 'It's not as simple as that, Betty.'
>
> 'Oh, but it is,' she insisted, 'it is.'

Linking Freud's theories of the uncanny with Marx, Samuel Weber argues that relation to socially determined objective structures such as 'commodities' which, according to Marx, appear to us as 'sensuous-supersensuous entities; or 'phantasmagorias,' representing' both the objectified labour power of society and an ambivalent, antagonistic social relationship. The relationship of the mining community with the owners that Dona Vera's heritage represented, reveals what Weber observes:

> This antagonism can be articulated in various ways: the commodity is both necessary to the reproduction of the producers (under a particular social system capitalism), and at the same time absorbs and consumes their physical energies, and thus embodies a permanent threat to their physical existence. And capital is also described by Marx in terms of the return of the "dead labour" of the past, which lives like a vampire sucking up living labour, and which thrives all the more, the more it devours. (*ibidem*)

The narrative invokes the time by cross-referring to the Centennial of the Revolution inaugurated by President Diaz. The carnivalesque spirit of Mexican cultural events: Orchestra of more than hundred musicians, playing of bands, "parades of floats from which beauties in Spanish dress tossed roses to the crowds buntings and streamers blew from the lamp post and, in the evening, there were fireworks in the plaza for which the entire town turned out, Mexican and Cornish alike." But what took them by terror and shock was the news that spread with the dawn, the rebellion had broken out and there started widespread looting.

When the attack came, no one was in the least prepared, many died. "They discerned that not all the rebels had escaped, the federals were living up some stragglers they had caught against the wall of the Casade la Moneda and were shooting them one by one."

The Cornish community gathered at Mrs. Morans, since she alone had living space for them. Pregnant Betty clutched at Davey's hands, as her time had come "biting her lips and drenched with perspiration". With Moran's help, Davey rolled her in blankets and carried her out to the last wagon to leave the village. Into this encampment, Betty's lifeless body finally delivered a baby. "They lost her, saving only the infant." "It was the three of them together that dug the grave outside the walled precinct of the cemetery .... by dusk it was ready and they buried her before the dark piling rocks upon the grave to guard it from Coyotes." The minister took him by the elbow, reminding him he now had a child to take care of and escorted him to Hacienda de la Soledad. The Cornish party had left except for Mrs. Moran and the infant. And more fortunately for Betty's child, "la Bella Isadore had given birth a short while ago to a still-born baby, and on seeing the tiny infant wrapped and mewling in Mrs. Moran's shawl, she took it to her full breast."

The time of Davey's departure occurred in the clamour of reports of riots and anarchy scaring away the engine driver. Pancho Villa and his band of rebellion were much romanticised heroes, the abandoned trains were their hideouts. Davey's train passes by one such scene where they have a passing view of the band of rebell ions:

> They were ringed by a band of musicians fiddling away madly what some recognised as 'Adelita,' known to be Pancho Villa's favourite song.

As their own train passed slowly, cautiously by, they asked each other if that had been Pancho Villa himself-Pancho Villa who said to wage war by rail, moving his men, his stores, even a field hospital and a gallows for traitors, along the tracks laid by President Porfirio Diaz, now fled-and if this was a presentiment of the new Mexico, the one they would not stay to see.

They were all scenes of an evil dream that he had to endure without knowing if he would wake from it and life would return to normality again. The eventual arrival at San Luis Potosi could make it possible for Davey to send a telegram to the Hamma family and thereafter for the last time Davey went to look at his son asleep in a cradle full of flannel and lace and found himself in a tangle of emotions" before returning to the mines. At the mines, however, the working conditions worsened. Davey who had never touched a drop now drank heavily. The time to return home was now at hand as the war broke out in Europe. Davey, together with the others, left immediately to book a passage to England. His country was caught up "in a wild wave of patriotism." Davey joined the men who volunteered themselves for receiving training in the Army. He was sent with a division of Rawlinson's fourth Army to France. Dying would have been a release, but he was only wounded in the Battle of the Somme and shipped back to England to recover. After having married Madge, a woman who nursed him, he brought his son Paul to live with him who was in the care of Betty's sisters.

Davey's journey ends up to guide us to Paul (Eric's father's journey). After schooling, he found a position in Liverpool as a Shipping Clerk, lodged in a boarding house near the docks with several other clerks. The idea of flight-of escape-like his other mates fascinated him. In the 2nd World War of 1939 he went to volunteer, but was rejected on account of curvature of the spine. Once he gets a cheap passage to America, but it disembarked up the coast of Maine. In the fishing village of Maine he found a vacancy in a local fishing business and then on his frequent visits to the house of his employer, he meets Madeleine, the youngest sister of the family, and falls in love. Marriage with Madeleine gave a home to eternally homeless Paul and now he had no reason to escape.

When Eric was born, Madeleine proved as protective of him as of the stranger she had married. On the visit back to Cornwall that she and Paul undertook when they left Eric with his grandfather "in the pebble dashed cottage by the sea, when he played with a toy train filled with sparkling flakes of ore till his step-grandmother, entering the room with a tea pot under a cosy,' said 'Now don't go filling his head with all that nonsense." The "sparkling flakes of ore" however remained buried in the mind of Davie's grandson, Eric, that he had once found in Mexico's mountains.

At Betty's graveside the meaning of his own journey is illumined to Eric. He wants to honour his dead like the polycentric traditional Hindu: "Coming out of the Cathedral he has to steady himself at the top of the stairs before he could descend them." He walks towards the cemetery. As it grew darker, darkness was intensifying: "The long night, the increasing chill, the effort of staying awake and alert, all became overwhelming, more than he could resist." As he walked towards the whitewashed wall that marked the periphery of the cemetery, he could make out a path winding up between rocks and cacti. Here he has the fantastic vision of young Betty descending the stairs with ease. Fascination and awe coincide in Eric's sublime imaginings.

She was preceded by a fragrance that was as fresh as the breeze that was blowing freely, not the heavy perfume of copal, tallow candles and funeral flowers but a much lighter, more natural one, of herbs like lavender, rosemary.

Eric stammered, 'You-you're like a flower yourself.' She almost said shyly mistaking Eric for Paul. "You're just as I thought, you would be. Dark like Davey-like all men in Davey's family. Eric admitted, "I think they have corne from Spain or somewhere. The narrative in the last pages follows the logic or fantasy. "Her eyes widened and Eric could see their grey transparent glaze." She proceeds to reply to the question about his not finding the graves.

Our graves? She asked, quite blandly, and pointed out to the hill she had descended. 'We're there. D' you know what they call it? Jew's fulill.... It was a place where they buried everyone not of their faith.'

The woman beckons Eric to follow her to the place of the pilgrimage, the place where the peyote cactus is found and is considered sacred by Huichol Indians. When Eric looks up to call and asks her to wait, she disappears. Leaving behind chrysanthemums:

> They lay limp on the wall, devoid now of any fragrance.... There was only the melancholy tinkling of

> bells and a movement of the speckled stones that proved to be young goats which had come to graze.

Eric recognises that the spell is broken, below is the living throbbing township, with the appearance of the Sun, the church bells begin ringing "calling the dead back to their graves". Eric has after all paid homage to his ancestors.

Eric's surrender to the uncanny experiences/visions by all means "alien" to an urban American sensibility enables us to make sense of a powerful comment on the nature of culture, "that people can participate fully and mutually in the same society, in the same universe of meaning, while having totally different (and untransmissible) experiences of the world."

The keen subtle eye and tranquil elegant prose carrying the surrealistic stories of several lives lead the narrative through synecdoche into the dark corridors and cunning passages of the past unveiling before us multivalent colourful cultural histories.

The conflation of accounts of mining, shamanistic practices, rebellion, wars, ethnic rituals, magic, ceremonies, history of ruins and devastation with the lurking images of the individual moments of loneliness of "wandering men and women" lend this novel the element of mystery that recall Henry James' travelogues-cum-novels.

As an uncanny fiction The *Zig-zag* Way weaving a conspiracy of perception and imagination, would like to haunt the readers: the individuals inhabiting this novel would remain numinous figures not fully realised as if in a kaleidoscope, who pass through the passage of time struggling, withering and dying. Eric nonetheless evolves as the quester of knowledge that the Rubaiyat of Omar' Khayyam visualise:

> Ah, my Beloved, fill the cups that clears Today of past
> regrets and future fears
>
> —Tomorrow?

> Why, Tomorrow I may be
>
> Myself with Yesterday's Seven Thousand years.

Like millions of travellers, Desai's quester protagonists would cherish the dream of carrying within themselves the wonders of the vast expanse.

7

Image and Symbolism in Character's Mind Set

In Anita Desai's writings the inner climate, the climate of sensibility is more compelling than the visible action. As Iyengar puts it, "Her forte... is the exploration of sensibility, the particulary kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease among the barbarians and the philistines, the anarchists and amoralising." In the present story the accompanist was persuaded by the senseless talks of his friends, Ajit and Bhola who were empty headed and leading him into it.

In real sense the accompanist was not convinced with the ugly thoughts of his friends but still he was compelled to think whether he could really be a front-rank musician or a ustad himself. The lines reveal his inner conflict as "...I thought, Are they right? or the sarod, or the veena? And become an ustad myself ?" He found himself in delimn and tries to analyse the situation.

For this purpose he goes on thinking about the futility of the time he had spent with his ustad and states, "Now these boys who had heard me play in the dark hall of our house have been an ustad myself, sat in the centre of the stağe, played for great audiences and been applauded for my performances. Were they right? Was this true? Had I wasted my life?" Then he finds the exposure of his mind after some soul-searching that he can never become 'ustad' in his own life. This idea is revealed in these lines, "Yes, anyone could play the tanpura for him, do what I do. But he did not take anyone else, he chose me. He gave me my destiny, my life," and thus, the alchemic touch of the master turned the crude and base boy into a noble and gentle accompanist who now regards him as his God on earth and feels, "Does a mortal refuse God?"

Our mind has various waves of thoughts which sometimes deviate us from our right path and we begin to doubt on our doings and become sad as the accompanist appears whispering, "Had I wasted my life?" As the feelings of repentance enter the mind of the person, he mends his short comings, his mind becomes pure and purged and then he realises extreme love. The accompanist confesses, "Only once I was shaken out my contentment, my complacency. I am ashamed to reveal it to you. It was so foolish of me ." Further he holds the view:

> Ours is a word formed and defined and enclosed not so much by music, however, a by a human relationship on solid ground level-the relationship of love.

The idea discussed in the above line describes the relationship between the accompanist and the ustad. The accompanist feels that their relationship is not only due to the music they played together, instead it was due to story human ties. The relationship developed due to the inspiration and guidance he received from the ustad who had framed his destiny it was further strengthened due to his love and devotion to the man he admired the most in his life.

The best ingredients of Desai's style in short stories are childhood memories and the haunting feelings surging out of a romantic heart. In view of Iyengar, "As we remain mesmorised by Anita Desai's verbal artistry and her uncanny evocation of atmosphere, her tale unfalteringly glides by and we force a rendition of the veil of the realm of personal experience and attain the desired finale of acceptance."

Childhood memories are also recollected by the accompanist when his trust was shaken out due to the provoking of his childhood friends. He cried continuously.

Everything appeared to be unpleasant and evil and then he recollected the past incidents of his life when he was a vagarant or a vagabond who was without hope, without aim and without destination and was passing a meaningless life. He goes back to his childhood days and reminiscences how other things were of importance to him. Music was worshipped in his family.

The central hall of his house was famous for the musical instruments made by both his father and his grand father . Cordantly and discordantly sound of his music could be heared. The accompanist himself had strong likeness for music and also started learning all ragas and raginis from his father, Mishraji at the age of four. His father, a maker of musical instruments, tasted his knowledge with rapid persistent questioning in his unmusical grating voice and frequently grabbed his ears and pulled it during his teaching. From such lessons he felt the need to escape and managed several times a day.

He was habitual of playing gulli-danda and kho and marbles with mischievous boys of his mohalla. He was fond of watching movies of Nargis and Meena Kumari who were the Queens of heaven for him. In order to fulfill his desires he never hesitated in stealing the money from his mother or father. His mouth watered for "halwa" and "jalebis" made by his mother and used to steal his brother's and sister's share for which he was beaten and cursed by the whole family. It was the life which he was leading before joining the musical band of ustad Rahim Khan at the age of fifteen.He is thirty years old now and for fifteen years he has been serving his ustad being his true accompanist.

Desai's 'The Accompanist' elaborates the beautiful relationship between Guru and Shishy and proves it more important than other relationships-mother and son, father and son, brother and sister, husband and wife etc. The accompanist has strong likeness for the sweets made by his mother instead of her. "How I loved my mother's sweetmeats, too rather more." What her picture he has in his life is clear in further statement, "I did the non-descript, mumbling, bald woman who made them.. She never came to life for me. She lived some obscure, indoor life, unhealthy and curtained, undemanding and uninviting."

He considers her as a wonderful cook. His father had been a hard taskmaster who would religiously wake up him in the early hours of morning and train him in music. He wanted his son to become a musician not an instrument maker. With this view he gave him lessons in playing the Tanpura, Harmonium, Sitar and the Tabla and taught him all ragas and raginis by testing his knowledge with persistent questioning.

It was the time when he was crazy for cinemas and playing marbles and had not so much likening for music. But when he was caught in a situation , he stood up to it. When his brain was washed by his friends, he began to doubt his father and recalled him by saying, "My father had taught me to play all these instruments and disciplined me severely, but he had never praised me or suggested I could become a front-rank musician. I had learnt to play instruments as the son of a carpenter.........But I had practiced on these instruments and played the ragas he taught me to play without thinking of it as an art or of myself as an artist. Perhaps I was a stupid, backward boy. My father always said so."

Such attitude towards his father the accompanist has Stealing the shares of his brother and sister proves him unkindly ,irresponsible ,unsociable and naughty boy. Now he is married and has become the man of the world but has no interest in his married life while in his childhood he was crazy for the street beauties and the cinema heroines and put himself in the place of their screen lovers. He considers that he married for his mother's pleasure, "I even married. That is, my mother managed to marry me off to some neighbour's daughter of whom she was fond. The girl lived with her. I seldom visited her. I can barely remember her name, her face."

Whenever he gets the chance to go home for a few days to rest, he desires of cutting short these holidays and returning to his house in the city to practice.

The love for music and ustad Rahim Khan changed everything in his life and he gave up all his childhood pleasures and pranks. "All fell away from me, all disappeared in the shadows on the other side." Ustad " took the place of " his mother's sweet halwa ,the cinema heroines, the street beauties ,marbles and stolen money." Ustad Rahim Khan's company brought several changes in his life and gave birth to him as Bhaiya, the tanpura player.

All his attractions regarding playing with the mischievous boys of mohalla and going to cinema disappeared. All his follies and stupidities or bad habits disappeared for ever. Music has taken their place and become the goal of his life. He is fully satisfied with this goal. Thus he devoted his whole life to ustad and became his true friend and accompanist because he was nothing. "It was Ustad Rahim Khan who saw me, hiding awkwardly in the shadows of an empty hall with a tanpura in my hands and called me to come to him and showed me what to do with my life. I owe everything to him, my very life to him." Thus he decided to remain royal in the same position giving the ustad the base material on which he would compose his music.

The intimacy between the accompanist and his ustad could not be perceived or understood by his childhood friends and their act of provoking him against his ustad failed and cultivated in him a strong sense of commitment towards his ustad. Having the feelings of self-assured, poised and self-satisfed he hired a tonga and asked the driver to take him to his ustad, his creator. Only one thing was going in his heart. I maintain I am his true accompanist, certainly his true friend.

The feelings of the accompanist to ustad Rahim Khan are expressed in the above line. He feels that he always plays the notes given by the ustad repeadly and he builds his music on the background provided by him. Thus he feels he is a true accompanist. Above all he never expects anything and never tries to compete in the performance with him. He never seeks the attention of the audience, their attention is always on the ustad, whenever his ustad suffers with the hacking cough in a concert, he always asks the accompanist to prepare the opium to quieten it, these points make him a true friend as well.

Tha accompanist stands for pure love and selfless service. When the ustad asked him, "Do you play? " These words contain a sense of security and relief, love and affection which were absence in his life. As a matter of fact, love is above money, above all the material gains and achievements. About the power of love, Coleridge has rightly observed:

All thoughts, all passions, all delights, Whatever stire this mortal frame, Are all but ministers of love And feed their sacred flame. The accompanist keeps on showing his true love and service to the ustad without any wish for gaining anything in return. "We have traveled all over India and played in every city, at every season. It is his life and mine. We share this life, this music, this following. What else can these possibly be for me in this world?"

It is interesting to note that Desai has beautifully presented the inner conflicts of the accompanist and also his victory over them. In fact, she believes in dealing with the mind and the soul of a character, his inner workings and hidden and silent thoughts rather than his outer appearances. Similiarly, 'The Accompanist' has a fine fusion of feelings and form and proves itself a great example of Desai's art and craftsmanship since her main business as a fiction writer is to expose the truth. Thus the story accentuates the importance of selfless love, devotion, dedication and gratitude in human relationship.

The liberal, humanist worldview imbedded in her narratives testifies to her exposure to not only art, aesthetics and liberalism but to psychoanalysis. The innermost dimensions of her characters therefore are made visible by the narrative of retrospection. In terms and references of depth psychology one may have deeper affinity and empathy with her characters. The portrayal of Maya, Nirode, Monisha, Mira Masi, Nanda, Raka, Deven, Matteo and Uma enables us to rediscover Karen Horney's perception that "All genuine neuroses are based upon disturbances of character which have existed since childhood, and it therefore follows that mere removal of symptoms carried out by means of hypnosis or suggestion can have no permanent value whatever. Basic anxiety as a feeling of being small, insignificant, helpless, endangered, arise in childhood in the case of children whose parents fail to give them genuine warmth and affection (usually because of their own neurosis), and who therefore have lost or never experienced 'the blissful certainty of being wanted.' Unconditional love is an essential for the child's normal development, and when this is refused the environment comes to be dreaded because ... it is felt to be unreliable, mendacious, unappreciative, unfair, unjust, begrudging and merciless. According to this concept the child not only fears punishment or desertion because of forbidden drives, but he feels the environment as a menace to his/her entire development and to his most legitimate wishes and strivings.

He feels in danger of his individuality being obliterated, his freedom taken away, his happiness prevented. This fear is not fantasy, but is well founded in reality."

Desai's awareness of the cultural determinism that affects adult lives as portrayed in the characters of Nirode Monisha Sita and Uma lend these characters psychological reality. In order to understand Maya's necrophelia, the obsession with love and death, we do not have to grope into the dark, but equip ourselves with the knowledge that:

> In an environment in which the basic anxiety develops, the child's free use of energies is thwarted, his self-esteem and self-reliance are undermined, fear is instilled by intimidation and isolation his/ her expansiveness is warped through brutality or overprotective love.

Maya, brought up in such an environment, grows up feeling that the world is a frightening place. In her relation to Gautama, she undergoes most frequently the processes of inferiorisation. One such glaring example occurs when Gautama declares that she possessed a "third rate poetess' mind". The unease disturbing her is tangible in the opening pages, I found myself rushing out and appearing breathlessly in their midst-the midst of this charmed circle of leisurely gentlemen so comfortably, secure male, laughing, talking, drinking, generally drinking themselves into delight". Gautama saw no value in anything less than the ideas and theories born of human and, preferably male brains: Gautama's acquaintances are alien to her. The narrative's reach into the elusive indescribable rhythm and tensions in relationship is awesome:

> And so we strolled up and down the lawn, talking desultorily, not really listening to each other, being intent, on our own path which, however ran parallel and closely enough for us to briefly brush against each other, now and then, reminding us or perhaps only myself of the peace that comes from companion life alone, from brother flesh. (Desai 1963: 18)

One is reminded of Virginia Woolfs To the Lighthouse, one of the most sensitively drawn portraits of marriage that succeeds in mediating all the diverse strands, man and woman relationship over time, subjectivity and relationship, life and art. Who could be a better example of a married woman than Mrs. Ramsay:

> Nothing seems to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it ... as so giving herself to the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins tickling-one, two, three, one, two, three. (Woolf 1972: 126)

The onus of sustaining a relationship is on the wife-Maya. Maya would want her life to be a joyous walk, willing to give and receive love. Other than the married life with Gautama, she does not have any other avenue to open herself fully to a meaningful life. The psychic distance between Maya and her husband remains unmitigated and her desolation resonates with self doubt, repressed grief.

The death of Toto, childless Maya's surrogate child, infuses into the narrative the jagged, hysterical tones when Maya cannot bear the sight of the corpse, "She rushes to the tap to wash the vision from her eyes. She thought she saw the glint of a blue bottle and grew hysterical." The grotesque images of death abound Maya's imagination:

> All day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could not be moved onto the verandah for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms. . . . Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and crows will eat anything, entrails, eyes, anything.

The pain of immured existence, is further aggravated at the sight of monkeys on the platform. The impact of any external stimuli stirs in her a flow of images. She is more sensitive to sounds, colours, smells. The peacock's agonised call for mating "Piya, Piya" echoes in Maya:

> 'Can you hear them, Gautama? Do you ... ?'
>
> 'Hear what?'

The inner grottoes and grooves oppress her with claustrophobic sensations; the narrative penetrates in kaleidoscopic images the innermost subjectivity:

> Long back bars at the window shut us in, and the thin walls of the small room locked us all close together. There was something furtive about our movements, a tenseness in our voices, as though we were performing a scene from a play in the confines of a cage, for the benefit of a heavily breathing though invisible audience.

Maya has no other alternative but to hold herself back from experiencing, realizing her human potentials.

In Voices in the City it is through Amla that Desai makes us see the hidden nooks and corners of her sister's caged existence:

> This sister had wandered away into some unholy garden of her own, stood there now like one of these lifeless statues, on the brink of the stone fountain, and seemed not to realise that the fountain was dry and what confronted her was no ripple and tickle of cool water but only dry, hard flagstones.

Nothing more could invoke the sub-human masochistic character of Nirode than the lines that he is "a dripping gargoyle, grotesque, offensive, comic". The inner disquiet of Monisha is projected in her perception of Calcutta as a "this devil city". To Amla, the 'harsh,' 'insidious' conspires against all who "wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?"

The emotional vacancy that envelops the mind of Nirode also afflicts Dev in Bye-Bye, Blackbird, the reserve and silence of the city of London mocks him at his recluse status. In the smoggy, hazy twilight the isolation of the Waterloo Station invokes a sense of dull melancholy:

> As in the old film, the dialogue was blurred, almost inaudible, merely an accompaniment to the scene-words snatched away and sank into the hase of departure, the fog of preconceived absence.

The city and the landscape in phantasmagoric images serve as the trope of the interiority of its inhabitants with cinematic efcts, Desai's vision of city reminding one of Dominique Lapiere's The City of Joy.

The enigmatic mysteries of mind and its fragmented multiple selves figure in Where Shall We Go This Summer? Sita's vision is intruded by the image of a crowd of crows attacking an eagle, "wounded or else too young to fly". She ascribes to herself the image of a "jelly fish, washed up by the waves, stranded there on the sandbar". Ironically quite a few critics choose to read this novel as Desai's illumination of the prospects of positive life. In spite of nastiness, brutishness, madness, boredom, life should be lived. Pregnant Sita's vicissitudes find a verbal transcription hard to accomplish. During the winter of 1947, Sita, then a young girl, lived on Manori island where her father was a legend to reckon with. Her mother however once escaped into the dark depths of the ocean. Manori obsesses Sita in her middle years and she feels alienated from her husband and children.

Desai's achievement lies in depicting the extraordinary craving of seemingly ordinary men and women. The loneliness and neglect Sita experiences is made delicately identifiable. Raman's arrival to Manori and stroking Karan's hair with gentleness stirs in Sita her own pent-up longing to be loved. Sita herself "ached to attract," she stared at him, "bored into him with her eyes, wanting and not being given what she wanted". The glazed irony ingrained in the narrative gives us the glimpse of uneasy equations:

> He stared at her with distaste thinking her grotesque. Her face was so grey, such sharp grooves ran from her nostrils to the corners of her mouth. It was the face of a woman unloved.... But whereas her beauty had turned haggard through, nerves, neglect and indifference.... He himself looked grey and lined and a backache still tormented him. How old they were, he thought, to be having another baby.

The content of the novel, its circular pattern, are reminiscent of Doris Lessing's Summer before the Dark. The journey of Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Kate Brown's journey in the paradigm of spiritual journeying are redolent with ambiguity. Alison Lurie complains about the end of Lessing's novel,

> Kate herself, now restored In health and looks, cannot think of anything to do but return home-like the seal in her dream, whom she has finally restored to the sea. The only apparent result of all Kate has gone through is

> the resolve not to dye her hair any more..... It is a puzzling, unsatisfactory conclusion to what up to this point has been a brilliantly realistic, wise, and courageous novel. Both this fatalistic ending and the title seem to suggest that for most women there is no escape from the prison constructed for them by society and their own sexual vulnerability. Yet this ending is as incomplete as any of the earlier ones would have been, because Kate is an incomplete character..... A woman like Kate, provided with exceptional intelligence, courage, energy and charm ... would surely have some interest, some ambition in life. Having achieved freedom, she would have something better to do with it than go into the dark.

With reference to the outcome of the itinerancy and sojourn of Lessing's Kate, when we consider Sita, we cannot help discern that both in their story-telling mode of probing their memories lend almost a mythic dimension to their journeys. M.H. Abrams however takes a view that "Lessing gives Kate the moments of spiritual awakening in ascending circle, or spiral. The ending is suggestive of Kate's return on a higher plane of understanding and experience." Sita's rite of passage in Desai's novel also culminates in images of circles and swirling:

> She looked out of the window to see him (Karan) running round and round in circles on the terrace, as if warming up his motor for the journey. Giddy from kneeling and bending so long, she felt herself whirling round and round as well, she felt the long, straight, monotonous tract of her life whip itself round her in swift circles, perhaps a spiral, whirling around and around till its very lines dissolved and turned to blur of silver, the blurred silver of the mirror like window-panes. All was bright, all was blurred, all was in a whirl. Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around muddling and confusing, leading nowhere.

A sombre recognition of this solt is indeed likely to bring about the desired detachment. Compared to Kate, however, Sita's condition is that of not being left with any viable alternative. She is in her present situation doubly trapped because of her pregnancy that renders her physically vulnerable. The period of gestation that she spent in Manori island in the context of her retrospection acquires double meaning. An awareness now descends upon her that the mundane boredom of routinised existence indeed drives one to escape but the escape into the past brings about encounters with unpleasant truths. The intense passions that possessed Sita in her quest, now evaporate. Not all lives are the charts of exciting happenings. The only thing true about most women's life is its dull continuity. The return to the island, therefore, remains a dream, the island within her soul remains uninhabited-lonely.

Memory is 'Jubilee and Knell' as Desai quotes Emily Dickinson in the epigraph of Clear Light of Day. The memory narratives of Bim and Nanda make us participate in the subterranean drama of inner discordant forces of their lives beyond control. The graphic verbal correlatives describe the inner landscape of Raka and Nanda in Fire on the Mountain, corroded by the memory of unjust power-relationship with patriarchy that Kate Millett so sharply perceives. Memory indeed is a knell to Nanda.

Her desire for self-dissolution is rendered thus: "she would merge herself with the pine tree and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all." Raka described as "shipwrecked," moves about in Kasauli like a 'soundless moth.' The image of predator abounding in the novel is not suggestive of the wild animals but of androcentric tendencies. Clear Light of Day makes us probe into the subject position of a woman struggling to speak out her experiences. Bim is deprived of romantic love which could have enlivened the cold arid zones of her virgin mind but also opened up new channels of life. Desai's narrative visualises Bim wallowing in self-pity, torturing herself with the grouse of being sucked and exploited:

> They had come like mosquitoes-Tara and Baku, and behind them the Misras, and somewhere in the distance Raja and Benazir-only to torment her and, mosquito-like, sip her blood. All of them fed on her blood-Now when they were full, they rose in swarms, humming away, turning their backs upon her.

Bim's reminiscing of past is an attempt to understand and master the memories of corrosive emotional hurts. In spite of the limitations of her past, she attempts to create a new different future. She dispels the lurking darkness and creates the clear light of the day, a triumph of her imagination. Her seclusion hones her introspection, she makes her own choices in renewing, transfiguring, casting another pattern of her life towards tranquillity and love. We recognise in this process Kierkegaardian observation that life can only be understood backward; but must he lived forward.

Extensive focus on the social fabric surrounding Deven's life in *In Custody* reveals a world where moral competence is irrelevant and that compounds and complicates the personal problems of the individual. Deven's prospect of growth or outgrowing his circumstances are bleak as no fresh breath of air or gleam of sunlight is allowed to enter: "The neem tree outside Deven's house has covered the entire courtyard with its branches like 'a dusty canopy."

'Dust' is a metaphor Desai employs to drive home the atrophied and stagnant life at Mirpore:

> The citizen of Mirpore ... could not be blamed for failing to understand those patriotic songs and slogans about the soil, the earth. To them it was so palpably dust.

The astute and shrewd observation of the decadent rural towns and the sordid power politics controlling and subordinating the lives of innocuous people narrated in stinging, ironic overtones, makes this novel worthy of being compared to Shrilal Shukla's Rag-Darbari.

The wry, ironic ending suggests that in order to seek fulfilling meaningful existence, one need not be in a symbiotic or obsessive relationship with the other "greater" or "superior" individual. An individual's liberation is possible only in a meaningful contact with his own resources. The irony afflicting Deven portrays the plight of an "underdog" crushed by the opportunism and corruption ingrained in the social mores.

In Clear Light of the Day, it is the bespectacled Misra sisters or Sarla, Deven's wife, in *In Custody*, who had the usual aspiration of her social background to own the three fs- 'Fan,' 'phone' and 'frigidaire!' The portrait of Sarla, whose expectations about married life are destroyed, is drawn with impeccable touches. The depiction of the heckled, pushed, buffeted and hopeless existence of Sarla recalls Fay Weldon's acerbic stories of female lives of drudgery:

> The thwarting of her (Sarla's) aspirations had cut two dark furrows from the corners of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth, as deep and permanent as surgical scars. The droop of her thin, straight hair on either side of her head repeated these twin lines of disappointment. They made her look forbidding and perhaps that was why her husband looked so perpetually forbidden, even if he understood their cause.

Desai's immense empathy for the injured and the insulted for the cultural "Other" finds verbal transcription in the invocation of the life of Hugo Baumgartner in Baumgartner ' Bombay. Sometimes one writes stories and sometimes a story visits a writer. Desai remembers:

> When I saw this Austrian Jew in Bombay-I actually saw the man pottering around the streets picking up scraps for his cats that I began to imagine his past. And that gave me the key to open the German world. And I was able to use my mother's memories of pre-war Germany and our own perception of the war far away from India simply as a set of rumours and news that came to us.

Viewed only as a fictional construct, Hugo Baumgartner should inspire only curiosity, yet he deeply moves readers ..

W.H. Auden's "Refugees' Blues" flows with feeling for an identical state of destitution:

> Once we had a country and we thought it fair
>
> Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
>
> We cannot go there now my dear,
>
> We cannot go there now.

The terrifying loneliness of Baumgal1ner is described as "shivering on a hot summer night" as abjectly as a dog who senses, he is about to be turned out into the street". Images of captivity, internment flow in the narrative.

Journey to Ithaca and The Zig-Zag Way testify to the formidable reach of Desai's vision. Both deal with the itinerancy and probe the atavistic and occult regions of experiences. Journey of Laila and Matteo brings them in struggle with the old allegiances, old beliefs.

The quest for discovering their true spiritual identity exposes them to a state of existential "thrownness." Matteo's faith is beset by vicissitudes and vacancy. Notwithstanding the risk involved in one's spiritual struggle, the novel visualises the prospects of the leap of faith: Laila/Lila attains this feat; grows into a realised soul. The novel posits hope in the possibility of genuine contact with one's spiritual core. In terms of the itinerant Eric's travelogue, the *zig-zag* history of Mexico appears in kaleidoscopic performance in the semblance of a carnival.

In Desai, love is a precarious journey as Monisha muses: "if only love existed that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and 'all stirrings of mind or conscience then but there is no such love" . The crux of Desai's novels from Cry the Peacock, Voices in the City, Clear Light of Day, Where We Shall Go This Summer? and Fasting, Feasting is the state of lovelessness. While most male critics have ascribed neurosis to Maya, Som P. Sharma's observation is much closer to Maya's truth:

> She is not seeking a fulfilment of the mundane love but of archetypal love ... longing for the companionship like that of Radha and Krishna. It is a communion that she seeks-the true marriage in which body, mind and soul unite-the sort which the peacock seeks when it shrieks out its ... intense mating calls.

Shanta Krishnaswamy too holds similar views when she says: " Her needs ... by a husband who is incapable of "husbanding her in his traditional masculine role." Uma's lovelorn existence of subjugation and discrimination, discontent drudgery in Fasting, Feasting receives alternately warm, compassionate and yet detached treatment, perhaps this mode of narrative makes the novel a documentary on female lives, disempowered, suffering perennial homelessness in India of the 1960s and 70s. A few lines of Emily Dickinson speak volumes about her condition that millions of women have shared:

> Big my secret but it's *bandaged*
>
> It will never get away
>
> Till the Day its weary Keeper
>
> Leads it through the Grave to Thee.

Desai's principal interest in the institution of family surfaces in her unsparing excavation of the appearance and reality of family life which is supposedly a necessary institution meant for socializing and humanizing mankind. Katherine Anne Porter puts it thus:

> even in harmonious families, there is this double life ... the one we can observe in our neighbours' household, and underneath, another, secret and passionate and intense-which is the real life that stamps the faces .... Always in his mind, each member is escaping, running away, trying to break the net which circumstances and his own affections have woven about him.

Most of her narratives reveal how parental authority accelerates schizophrenic problems, either ingraining unrealistic expectations, or desiccating an individual of all potentials. In an average family as Desai observes, the true feelings, true experiences are condemned and attacked because they do not conform to the role models formulated by the society-by the sexual-social arrangements. Maya, Mira Masi, Uma, Monisha, Raka and Nanda, described in imagining of net, cobweb, snare hedge, tunnel tomb, poignantly reveal the psychoanalytical view of R.D. Laing:

> although ego defence is necessary upto a point, a constant need to defend against a cauldron of unconscious elements place great strain upon ego's energies, with resulting exhaustion. The ego, besieged as it were, from within and without suffers from anxieties about coping, while containing frustrated impulses. The' psyche having a limited amount of energy finds itself sapped by excessive inner conflict leading to repressions, anxieties, frustration, longing, denials and displacement in feminine behaviour.

The fictional world of the western writers, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood, Joyce Carole Oates or Fay Weldon inhabits doctors, teachers, professors, researchers, characters who are economically self-reliant.

In proactive combat against patriarchal dominance, several of them seek self-empowerment and endeavour to rise above their circumstances. Desai's women belong principally to the domestic sphere who fail to register effective protest against the dominant traditions, their standards and values demanding autonomy or seeking positive self-discovery. Desai competes with Shashi Deshpande in drawing our attention to those lives that lay buried, unread, infrequently noticed and mostly misinterpreted. Both reveal concern with the split self, with the sense of isolation a would-be writer feels between her social female self and her inner artistic self.

They share a common understanding of women writers as having been traditionally isolated from a primarily masculine culture precisely through the elements-gender female experience, artistry, imaginings. Against a poetic landscape, the universe of Desai's characters discloses lives intensely lived, passionately felt, shot through the colours and nuances of desires as she seeks to make language perform the impossible task of simply being without referring. In making her honed sense of human psychology prevail everywhere, she imagines deeply from within the aboriginal core suffusing the inner world of her characters with the "heat and violence" (Woolf 1990: 18) of the poet's heart.

8

Existentialism in Anita Desai's *Fire On the Mountain*

Existentialism as a philosophy is historically and culturally of European origin. Ever since it was recognised as the dominating philosophy of the West in the mid- twentieth century, it has left "its impact on literature which has both been substantial and significant". Existentialism does not offer a set of doctrines or a single philosophy system. It has been diversely defined and interpreted by various thinkers over the years. As a result, "as a philosophy, existentialism by its very nature defies and abhors systematisation" (Ahmad, 10).

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain traits of this school of thought. All the existentialists "emphasise the importance of the individual as well as his freedom and responsibility for being what he is" (Das, 423). In their attempt to describe man's "existence and its conflicts, the origin of its conflicts, and the anticipation of overcoming them" (Ahmad, 13), existentialists focus their attention on certain aspects of human existence. Srivastava enumerates them as follows:

- it is never safe and ever at the mercy of chance,
- it is full of suffering, of one variety or other,
- it is full of conflict,
- it is rotted in guilt,
- it cannot escape from the final situation of death

These tenets of existentialism have been widely reflected in the literature of the world since the advent of Sartre who established an interaction between literature and philosophy in his writings. John Macquarrie sums up the essence of existentialism as, "On the whole, it has been the tragic sense of life... that has been prevalent among the existentialists". Almost all great writers of the present generation have handled the doctrines of existentialism in their works. This is the main reason why "man's alienation, dread, absurdity, bad faith, responsibility, commitment to freedom, anguish are the very hallmarks of 20th century literature".

As a novelist, Anita Desai exhibits a strong inclination towards the existentialist interpretation of the human predicament. In particular, she voices "the mute miseries and helplessness of married women tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments". A woman novelist, Desai has won a niche by exploring the emotional world of women, bringing to light the various deeper forces at work in feminine sensibility as well as psychology. This predilection leads her to examine the psyche of her women protagonists when they are confronted with the absurdity of life. This draws her attention to the darker side of life. She projects a tragic vision in her novels by placing her female protagonists in hostile situations.

Desai further examines her women protagonists as individuals who find themselves forced into uncongenial environments, fighting against the odds. This problem of the tragic tension between the individual and their unfavourable environment acquires the dimensions of existential angst. Starting from her first novel Cry the Peacock to the latest Baumgartner's Bombay, all her novels highlight the existentialist's predilection for portraying the predicament of man. Many critics have traced shades of existentialist thought in the novel of Anita Desai. Time and again her themes and characters have been interpreted in the light of existential philosophy. In this regard it has been pointed out:

Desai's chief concern is human relationship. Her central theme is she existential predicament of an individual, which she projects through incompatible couples very sensitive wives and ill matched husbands. She is a minute observer and perceives everything mutely, minutely and delicately. Whenever she creates a poetical situation, she gives it a perfect poetic treatment to every detail. Anita Desai's characters are self-conscious of the reality around them and they carry a sense of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. She adds a new dimension turning inward into the realities of life and plunges into the deep-depths of the human psyche to score out its mysteries and chaos in the minds of characters.

Particularly Fire on the Mountain has been identified as "the lyrical fictionalisation of the quintessence of existentialism". A close study of the texture and theme of the novel in relation to the tenets of existentialism justifies the above observation. It has been noted that "Fire on the Mountain displays skillful dramatisation of experiences of certain women embroiled by the cross way of life". This novel deals with the existential angst experienced by the female protagonist Nanda Kaul, an old lady living in isolation. It also projects the inner turmoil of a small girl, Raka, who is haunted by a sense of futility. Thirdly, it presents the plight of a helpless woman, Ila Das who is in conflict with forces that are too powerful to be encountered, resulting in her tragic death.

Thus, the existential themes of solitude, alienation, the futility of human existence and struggle for survival form the major themes of the novel. Fire on the Mountain falls into three sections, each further divided into several short chapters of unequal length. The first section titled "Nand Kaul at Carignano" runs into ten chapters. This section deals with Nanda Kaul, the main protagonist's lonely life in Kasauli. "Raka comes to Carignano" forms the second section and it contains twenty one chapters. It portrays Nanda Kaul's change of attitude towards Raka, her great granddaughter.

In the final section Ila Das leaves Carignano is divided into thirteen chapters. This section presents the tragic end of Ila Da, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend. In all, the book runs to 145 pages. The structural unity, as suggested by the section captions is offered by Carignano, Nanda Kaul and Raka, running counter to one another complemented by that of Ila Das also provide unity of structure. Like the other works of Anita Desai, the present novel contains neither any story value nor events that are interesting by themselves. The entire novel revolves round the existential angst experienced by the women protagonists.

In this novel, "the story element is very thin and there is practically no action except for the tragic end". The story revolves round the inner lives of the two female protagonists, Nand Kaul and Raka. Nanda Kaul is the wife of Mr.Kaul, the Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University. When the novel begins, Nanda Kaul is living in Carignano, far from the madding crowd. She is leading a life of isolation and introspection. She shuns all human company. Even the postman's arrival to deliver the letter is frowned upon by her. But this seeming quietude does not last long. Raka arrives at Carignano to convalesce after her typhoid attack. The old woman and the young girl live in double singleness. But as days pass by, Nanda Kaul finds herself drawn towards Raka, something she had not expected. But the little girl refuses to be befriended and escapes into the hills looking for company in solitude.

Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's childhood friend visits Carignano to meet Raka. A one time lecture in the Punjab University, Ila Das had lost her job subsequent to Mr.Kaul's retirement. She has come to Kasauli now in her new capacity as an officer in the social welfare department. She fights against child marriage by enlightening the local people about the evils of this practice. This invites the wrath of many of the villagers of whom Preet Singh is one. His attempts to barter his little daughter for a tiny piece of land and a few goats have been successfully thwarted by Ila Das. He is lying in wait to settle his score with her. One evening, when Ila Das returns late from Carignano to her humble house in the valleys, he waylays her, rapes and murders her. When the news of Ila Das's death is conveyed to Nand Kaul over the phone, she is rudely shocked and falls dead. Raka unaware of her great grandmother's death, rushes into the house proclaiming wildly that she has set the forest of fire.

Nanda Kaul, Raka and to some extent Ila Das, are embodiments of the existential predicament experienced by the individual in an un-understanding and even hostile universe. A detailed examination of the characters of these protagonists brings to light how Anita Desai has succeeded in giving expression to her existentialist world-view through these characters and by a subtle use of imagery and symbols.

When the novel begins, Nand Kaul is presented as a recluse. Living all alone, except for the company of the servants who dare not disturb her privacy, she brooks no human presence. "She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be unwelcome intrusion and distraction". She spends her days in isolation, musing about her past and experiencing the existential ennui. "From the musings of her agitated mind it appears that as the wife of the vice-chancellor for the Punjab University and the mother of several children, she has lived a very busy and tiring life".

Anita Desai unfurls her past in the form of long interior monologues punctuated by authorial interruptions, Nanda Kaul had witnessed only betrayals and demands in life before her retirement to Kasauli. She had lived a monotonous life receiving and treating the endless stream of visitors who used to call on her vice-chancellor husband. Her husband had carried on a life-long affair with his mathematics mistress Miss David, whom he would have married, had she not been a Christian. Again, the memories of her children make Nanda Kaul shudder at the very thought of her past. As a mother of several children, all demanding and unaccommodative, she had been given too many anxious moments.

Now all alone in Carignano, a house associated with many weird stories, Nanda Kaul feels that loneliness is the only essential condition of human life. Whenever she looks at the tall pine trees that stand out from among the underwood, she is reminded of her own alienation. Not exactly conscious of what she is waiting for, nonetheless, she is awaiting the inevitable end to all human existence: death. She is haunted by the existential angst which has led her to conclude that human life is basically a lonely struggle against the odds of life. In her case the odds have manifested themselves in the form of an adulterous husband and cantankerous children. Strongly convinced that life and dealt a raw deal to her, she has resolved to find the meaning, if any, of her existence in isolation. "She treasures her freedom, her privacy, glad her responsibilities towards her family are over, glad she needs nobody and nobody now needs her".

This has coloured her outlook on life to a large extent. Her reaction to the arrival of the postman and Raka, her invalid great granddaughter, makes it appear that she has become a misanthrope. But the truth seems to be that she is a sensitive person preoccupied with the real nature of her existence as opposed to the illusory life of her past as a vice-chancellor's wife and mother to children.

"If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great grand daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice like Nanda Kaul, she was born to it, simply". Desai's above observation about Raka's character at once brings out the similarity and difference with that of Nanda Kaul's in their mental make up. Raks's characters has been introduced by the novelist as a foil to Nanda Kaul's. If Nanda Kaul symbolises a particular aspect of existentialism, which is examined elsewhere in this chapter, Raka epitomises another aspect of the existential predicament:

the influence of her parents on her life. Anita Desai makes Raka both young temperamentally and solitude-loving. When Raka is first introduced, the reader is informed that she is the granddaughter of Asha, the most problematic of Nanda Kaul's daughters. That she is an unwelcome intruder into Nanda Kaul's life is suggested by an image. As Nanda Kaul first looks at her great- grand daughter who is walking towards her, she reminds the old lady of an insect: Raka slowed down, dragged her foot, then came towards her great grandmother with something despairing in her attitude.. She turned a pair of extravagantly large and somewhat bulging eyes about in a way that made the old lady feel more than ever her resemblance to an insect.

However, the old lady is shocked to see the pale and gaunt little girl and is moved to pity. But "to Nanda Kaul she was still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry". Raka herself does not bother much about the "blatant lack of warmth" exhibited by her great grandmother. She prefers to stay away from company. Like a wild animal newly caged, she keeps prowling barefoot in her room, looking at the stone heaps. She is not interested in flowers or playing as children of her age normally tend to do. By using two reptile images successively in a span of two pages, and by a suggestive hint about Raka's lack of interest in play and flowers, Desai impliedly establishes that there is something weird about her. Soon through several interior monologues enacted in Raka's subconscious mind, the reason for the abnormality in her is unfolded.

The daughter of an ill-matched couple, Raka has been witness to the brutality and futility of human existence. She is haunted by the recollections of the nightmarish nights that have made her almost a child-stoic. Somewhere behind them, behind it all was her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of the night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse-harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet her mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt that flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering, so that she didn't know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. Ahead of her, no longer on the ground but at some distance now, her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying.

The sudden shift from the interior monologue about her bitter past to the present observation of the jackal crying, the latter superimposed on the former brings out Raka's predicament. By doing this, the novelist likens the haunting memories to the crying jackals. So Raka's life is a close encounter with things that are wild and frightful be it the memories of her mother beaten to pulp by a drunkard father or the chilling cry of the jackals. Instead of trying to escape from this harsh and unnerving experiences and memories, Raka goes farther and deeper into them as if to fathom the bottom of such wild realities.

After some initial hesitation, she ventures deep down the ravine to the Monkey Point a place not frequented by others and from where the cries of the jackals are heard: No one ever came here but Raka and the cuckoos that sand invisibly. These, the cuckoos were not the dutiful domestic birds that called Nanda Kaul to attention at Carignano. They were the demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka on to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade, and skeletons kept in beds of ash on which the footprints of jackals flowered in gray.

This passage effectively coveys Raka's plight and significance. She is at once a little girl with a splintered psyche and an unmistakable symbol of the individual's quest for meaning. The jackals are symbols of the mystery of life and Raka's walk to the Monkey Point is symbolic of her search for something unknown, yet inevitable and indispensable. Not all children would dare to brave the rough terrains of the ravines and impending menace of the jackals. Similarly, not all human beings are conscious of the futility of human existence nor are they in search of newer values. The existential theme of quest for meaning undertaken by those who refuse to remain merely as members of the multitude is well brought out in the lonely and mystified wanderings of Raka. In this respect it has been pointed out by Shantha Krishnaswamy:

> Her [Raka's] childhood has hardened her into a little core of solitary self-sufficiency and now, a young girl up here in the mountains.. her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting 'I don't care, I don't care, I can't care of anything'. The conventional sweet smells and sounds of girlhood are ignored, she feels drawn by scenes of devastation and failure. The forest fires tingle her and she bursts from the shell of Carignano like a sharp, keen edged explosive to set fire to the mountainside. (Krishnaswamy 261, 262)

The concluding part of the foregoing observation concerning Raka's predilection for the forest fires needs elaborate analysis for it has symbolic overtones. Ever since her arrival at Carignano, Raka evinces a keen interest in wild fire. This obsession with the forest fire provides yet another dimension with the forest fire provides to her existentialist preoccupations. Immediately after her arrival at Carignano, on witnessing a fire in the forest she becomes obsessed with forest fires for they seem to her the empirical manifestation of her inner conflict: whether to continue with her mediocre and painful and aimless existence imposed upon her by heredity and environment or to revolt against their dictates and attempt to create her own values.

By an elaborate expression of her free will and demonstration of her ability to choose and act, she sets the forest on fire towards the end of the novel. The fire created by her is the result and manifestation of her existential angst to destroy the old and meaningless to make room for the new and significant. It is an affirmation of her search for values in an otherwise futile existence. Ila Das is the third female protagonist of the novel. Unlike Nanda Kaul and Raka who are central to the story, her role is only marginal. Nonetheless, Anita Desai has projected yet another aspect of the existentialist philosophy through her character. "Her life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence". She is first introduced to the readers, when she calls Nanda Kaul on the phone and informs her of her intended visit to Kasauli to meet Raka. She speaks in a "hideous voice" and is rather plain in her looks. Through a long interior monologue in Nanda Kaul's mind, the readers are informed of her past. She was Nanda Kaul's childhood friend.

She had also served in the university as a lecturer, thanks to Nanda Kaul's good offices. But soon after the death of Mr.Kaul she had been ousted and had struggled a lot before finding the present employment as a social welfare officer. A poverty stricken loner of aristocratic of child marriage, a practice rampant among the tribals.

This lands her in an unenviable situation. She finds herself fighting a lonely battle against a mindless multitude. But she is not cowed down by adversity. She remains steadfast in her conviction and refuses to make any compromises. Though she is aware of the dire consequences that she might be forced to encounter, she remains faithful to her cause. She succeeds in stooping several such child-marriage, the prominent one being the marriage of Preet Singh's seven year old daughter. Sustaining herself on a meagre pay and putting up with the inevitable condition of loneliness, she wages a valiant battle against the dictates of the society. Finally, she pays a dear price for her convictions and refusal to compromise. She is raped and murdered by Preet Singh who has been dying for revenge.

Though Ila Das plays a minor role in the novel, she is also an allegorical figure. She not only lives in isolation but also braves the brute majority with conviction and commitment as her tools. True, she meets with a tragic end but has made her existence significant in exhibiting courage and determination in the face of stiff resistance and threat to life. "Her real involvement in people's welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance". She epitomises the existentialist concept of struggle against the odds of life. "For the existentialist, man is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities of tragic conflict".

She stands for the thinking individual who dares to exercise her free will and act according to her choice rather than submit meekly to the odds of life. The mindless tribal society in general, and Preet Singh in particular, represent the malevolent aspect to human existence-forces that are bent upon thwarting the individual's purpose and undoing her. "One of the many ways of defining tragedy sees it as a clash between the aspiration of human freedom and creativity with a cosmic order that is stronger and defeats man". Though Ila Das loses her chastity and life in the process of her struggle with such brute forces, her life has nonetheless become meaningful by virtue of the fact that she chooses a cause, fights for it and sacrifices herself in trying to accomplish her task.

An examination of the use of symbolism and imagery in the novel proves beyond doubt the novelist's existential concern. She portrays a tragic world where no compromises are made, no epiphanies are exploded, to be totally destroyed, as the sensitive, the visionary suffer nothing but suffocation and oppression. So, the content of the novel is sheer violence. The lives of the principal characters are 'unloved' and 'unlived'.

In keeping with this concept, Anita Desai resorts to the effective employment of imagery and symbolism in Fire on the Mountain. Her predilection for prey-predator imagery abounds in this novel also. Images of ugliness, loneliness, destruction and annihilation are consistently used in order to reflect the existential tone of the novel. An atmosphere of solitary introspection is created with the help of several images. For example, when she receives a call from Ila Das, Nanda Kual "turned her head this way and that in an escape. She watched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation". The same is continued in the next page also: "Still starting at the hen which was greedily gulping down bits of worm, she thought of her husband's face and the way he would plait his fingers across his stomach... This prey-predator image of hen pecking at a worm is suggestive of Nanda Kaul's present inner turmoil. Her past suffering at the hands of the adulterous husband and her present awareness about the harsh realities of life are both successfully established by this image.

Another important image employed recurrently is that of the pine tree that stands burnt and alone, which is often an object of attraction for Nanda Kaul: "She was grey, tall and thin ... she fancied she could merge with the pine tree and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was prepared to undertake". Again, this image also contributes to the existentialist theme of the novel. "Nanda's sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life".

The image of the charred pine tree is repeatedly employed in the novel. Raka is reminded of the futility of existence while she looks at the lonely hills and charred pine trees: "This hill, with its one destroyed house and one unbuilt one, on the ridge under the fire-singed pines, appealed to Raka... There was something about it illegitimate, uncompromising and lawless.... The sense of devastation and failure drew her, inspired her". Images of insects like lizards, birds like eagles and parrots, and "the thematic image of the 'fire' with its connotations of violence and urgency occur at regular intervals, warning the reader of the impending tragedy".

The critics Indira sums up the significance of imagery in Fire on the Mountain quoting D.H. Lawrence and the novelist herself:It is the charming mosaic of imagery woven so skillfully by the novelist that makes the Novel a work of art. Quoting D.H.Lawrence who said, If I eat an apple, I like to eat it with my senses, Anita Desai herself stated that the novel in which she attempted this closeness of man and beast, earth and vegetable was Fire on the Mountain. Imagery alone makes it possible and, in the process, the novel gains a richer texture and greater depth. As a critic says, "this novel deprived of its imagery, would be an ugly skeleton, chilling the reader" ... The significant house imagery, the images of plants, colour, atmosphere and moon-all contribute to the textual density and symbolic centrality of the novel.

Another important aspect of this novel's narrative technique is its symbolism. There are several symbols that deepen the philosophic implications of the novel. To start with, Carignano, Nanda Kaul's present abode, is symbolic of the loneliness and barrenness of human life in general and Nanda Kual in particular: What pleased and satisfied her so, here at Carignano, was its barrenness. This was the chief virtue of Kasauli, of course its starkness...Occasionally an eagle swam through this clear undoubted mass of light and air.

The lonely house is symbolic of the lonely life of Nanda Kual and Raka. The barrenness and starkness associated with its symbolise an essential human condition alienation which is the key note of all existential philosophy.

The eagle symbol, like the house symbol, is repeatedly used in the course of the novel to highlight another aspect of existential philosophy, namely quest. The sight of the eagle flying high, makes Nanda long to be able to soar like the bird: "An eagle swept over.... its wings outspread, gliding on currents of air without once moving its great muscular wings which remained in repose, in control, She, Nanda Kaul, had wished, it occurred to her, to imitate the eagle-gliding, with eyes closed". This longing for soaring above the reach of deterministic confines is the hall mark of Raks's characters. To emphasise this aspect, the novelist employs the eagle symbol while describing Raka's walk to the Monkey Point. "She was higher than the eagles, higher than Kasauli and Sanwar and all the other hills...". Thus Nanda Kaul's wish and Raka's attempt merge in the eagle-symbol, which denoted their existential angst and quest for values.

The forest fire scene has symbolic overtones. Like the "The Fire Sermon" in T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, the fire in Fire on the Mountain " ... is a destroyer. It is also a purifier". By making use of the universal fire symbol. Anita Desai endows Raka's character with allegorical implications. Raka, the invalid restless little girl who is the product of a broken home, becomes the symbol of the existentialist's perception of the individual who finds herself in this hostile and futile world. Yet out of compulsion, she strives to find or create values and significance for her existence. In this regard it has been observed that the symbolic implication of the forest fire is reinforced by the title of the novel, Fire on the Mountain is highly significant from the thematic point of view. The mountain symbolises Nanda Kaul and the fire is symbolic of Raka's wild nature. "Nanda is the 'rocky belt', dry, hardened by time and age. Raka is silent, swift and threatening like forest fire... The novel, thus may be noted as a story of inabilities of human beings to ignore the world, to place oneself in another's position" (Choudhury, 79).

Another factor that adds to the philosophical implications of the novel is the frequent allusions to books and poems. As in other novels in Fire on the Mountain too Anita Desai uses poetry, and this time it is a poem by Hopkins:

I have desired to go

Where springs not fail

To fields where files no sharp and sided hail

And a few lilies below

And I have asked to be

Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing to the sea.

This poem has some connection with he character of Nanda Kaul who quotes it and the poem signifies her desire to be away from the humdrum of life, to a heaven of nature far from the madding crowd. By introducing this poignant stanza from Hopkin's poem, Anita Desai highlights the theme of alienation which is the central theme of the novel. The same effect is achieved by introducing an allusion to a passage from The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon which begins with a title 'When a Woman lives Alone' and through the image of a dilapidated house "with a poignantly desolate look ". This image has symbolic overtones as it suggests the lonely and desolate life of Nanda Kaul herself. Again, when Nanda Kaul is in the company of Raka, there is an allusion to The Travels of Macro Polo. The reference to this book reminds the 'Cape of Good Hope'. This also adds to the symbolism of the novel. This is miniature adventure like the one Marco Polo undertook in search of something new and promising.

Thus, the characters of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das are studies of women in isolation. Essentially a writer of existential inclinations, Anita Desai examines three important aspects of this school of thought through her protagonists. The predominant traits of existentialism are alienation, quest and conflict. These three aspects are epitomised in the lives of three female protagonists.

Nanda Kaul is a study in alienation and existential angst. Raka symbolises the individual's quest for meaning in an otherwise futile life. Ila Das stands for the eternal conflict enacted in the human drama between the individual and the forces of determinism. One common ground for these three characters is that they are women who live in isolation both out if choice and compulsion. Desai has examined the predicament of women in wilderness by placing these three characters Kasauli, a place surrounded by hills and valleys, for removed from civilisation. She has consciously done it to examine the predicament and psyche of women in isolation. By placing her female protagonists with nature herself as the backdrop, Anita Desai has endowed a symbolic and universal significance to the plight of her protagonists. In this regard it has been pointed out:

Essentially, Desai is a novelist of existentialist concerns, chiefly considering what F.H.Heinaman described as 'the enduring human condition. In her novels, she has ably dwelt upon such existentialist themes as maladjustment, alienation, absurdity of human existence, quest for the ultimate meaning in life, decision, detachment, isolation and time as the fourth dimension, focussing on how women in the contemporary urban milieu are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life.

To sum up, Fire on the Mountain invites comparison with Shakespeare's King Lear. In this great tragedy, when he dramatises the agony of betrayed father, Shakespeare removes Lear from the palace and places him in the wild heath a hostile place to suggest that the plight of Lear is identical with the suffering of every wronged father. Shakespeare employs animal imagery to indicate the rotten and corrupt world of the dramatis personae of King Lear. Images of ugly and evil animals like jackals and wolves are recurrently used creating an animal imagery that reinforces the thematic concern of the play, namely the tragedy of human life, personified in the life of Lear, a victim of indifference in old age. Anita Desai's use of imagery of King Lear. By making use of the images of insects and animals like mosquitoes, lizard and jackals, Desai hints at how her female protagonists despise the absurdity of their existence.

They either withdraw into a shell like Nanda Kaul or like Raka, long for something new or is made miserable by the environment as in the case of Ila Das. Similarly, by making Kasauli the location of her novel, Desai has endowed it with a wider appeal where the boundaries of region, religion and time cease to exist. This novel contains the core of the novelist's existential world-view in that all the three characters are nothing but the manifestations of her alter ego that gives expression to her outlook on life. It may not be an exaggeration to her outlook on life. It may not be an exaggeration to say that Fire on the Mountain merits a place in the galaxy of existential masterpieces like Kafka Trial, Camus' The Plague and Sartre's Nausea.

9

Entrapments at Home and Abroad in Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting

Fasting, Feasting (1999) is a novel by Indian writer Anita Desai. It was Shortlisted, Booker Prize for Fiction in 1999.

Uma is a spinster who lives with her overbearing parents. They confine her at home, smothering her aspirations of independence. Her sister Aruna, by contrast, brings off a good marriage, whereas her younger brother Arun is sent to study in the USA.

Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting, as it is implied in the title itself, is a novel of contrast between two cultures, the one, Indian, known for its pious and longstanding customs representing 'fasting,' and the other, American, a country of opulence and sumptuousness epitomising 'feasting.' The plot unveils through the perceptions of Uma, in India, and of Arun, in America. Both of them are entrapped, irrespective of the culture and enveloping milieu, by oppressive bonds exercised by their own parents, MamaPapa. They are just MamaPapa or PapaMama but remain nameless throughout the novel. Yet, this namelessness does not indicate their anonymity but signifies their universality. They are the prototypical parents found everywhere in the middle-class families of India, who discuss, plan, plot, control, govern the activities of their children, be it marriage or going abroad for studies. And in their over-domineering concern, they tend to ignore the inadvertent possibility of entrapping their own offspring.

Thus, they do not give contingency to the fact that perhaps their children too can have a life to call their own. May be even their own preoccupations, their own priorities, maybe an agenda for themselves that goes beyond what they actually want for their children. The novel beings with a snapshot of MamaPapa in a contemplative mood: "The parents sit, rhythmically swinging, back and forth. They could be asleep, dozing-their eyes are hooded-but sometimes they speak." That is when a sudden deluge of ideas hit them and they order their eldest daughter, Uma, to carry out them without delay. Uma is asked first to inform the cook to prepare sweets for her father, with neglectful impatience that she has been already asked to pack a parcel to be sent to her brother Arun in America. While she comes literally running on her toes, she is entrusted with an additional job of writing a letter to their son. Somewhere in the middle of the novel, the reader understands that it is the usual scene that goes on in the household of MamaPapa.

"All morning MamaPapa have found things for Uma to do. It is as if Papa's retirement is to be spent in this manner-sitting on the red swing in the veranda with Mama, rocking, and finding ways to keep Uma occupied. As long as they can do that, they themselves feel busy and occupied". In this manner, living under the demanding rule of MamaPapa, Uma is repressed, suppressed and is imprisoned at home. The first part of the novel tells us in a flashback as how she became a reluctant victim of entrapment at home. The second part of the novel shows how her brother Arun, who leaves his home for higher studies, but feels trapped by the very education that is meant to liberate him.

Usually, at home, it would be an oppressive atmosphere even if one of the parents is overpowering. With regard to Uma, both of her parents appear to have merged into a single identity MamaPapa/PapaMama, as if they have a "Siamese twin existence". Hence, whenever MamaPapa say something, and whoever says it, it comes with double the intensity and power that it cannot be defied at all. "Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough as it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make them even more immense". Despite a slight variation in the roles they have chosen to play, Papa's of "scowling" and "Mama's scolding", in terms of opinion, they never differed from each other. Therefore, if one refused there would not be any "point in appealing to the other parent for a different verdict: none was expected, or given".

Further more, the women are not allowed for outings usually, but when Papa feels that the women laze around the house too much, then they would be taken to the park for walk. On one such occasion, Uma gets easily distracted and fails to keep pace with her Papa. Though Papa is far away, and she is left in the company of Mama, she would not dare attempt to buy some eatables on her wish though it is highly tempting: "Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing". In the end, Uma is blamed for being "slow" when all the while Uma could not reconcile herself as why they are hurrying just to go back home. Likewise, the children are not allowed to have any sense of privacy even when they have grown-up. They are not allowed to shut any doors in the household. For this meant secrets, especially nasty secrets, which are impermissible: "It meant authority would come stalking in and make a search to seize upon the nastiness, the unclean blot".

MamaPapa also decide which of their children should have education and how much of it. As far as Uma is concerned, a pleasant escape from her claustrophobic conditions at home is her school-going. The convent school for her is "streaked with golden promise". Hence, she always goes early to the school and later finds some excuse to linger there for longer time. Conversely, she feels deprived during dull weekends when she is left at home: "There were the wretched weekends when she was plucked back into the trivialities of her home, which seemed a denial, a negation of life as it ought to be, somber and splendid, and then the endless summer vacation when the heat reduced even that pointless existence to further vacuity".

Regardless of Uma's verve for convent education, she is forced to stop going to school when Mama gives birth to the third baby, Arun. Even as Uma shows disagreement, she is coaxed, cajoled and finally threatened to accept her Mama's decision:

> 'But ayah can do this-ayah can do that' Uma tried to protest when the orders began to come thick and fast. This made Mama look stern again. 'You know we can't leave the baby to the servant,' she said severely. 'He needs proper attention.' When Uma pointed out that ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies, Mama's expression made it clear it was quite a different matter now, and she repeated threateningly: 'Proper attention'.

Later, Uma looks forward towards her marriage to give her the much-needed relief, yet, unfortunately, she returns home frustrated after a deceitful marriage and subsequent divorce. Back at home, she gets a rare, job offer through Dr. Dutt, but MamaPapa refuse to send her. When Dr. Dutt persists on taking Uma for the job, Mama lies of an illness for which she needs Uma to nurse her. In like manner, when Uma receives an invitation for a coffee party from Mrs. O'Henry, MamaPapa refuse to send her to the party because of the apprehension that Mrs. O'Henry might ensnare her and convert her into a Christian nun.

Reduced thus to a baby-sitter at her earlier days and an unpaid servant for her self-centred parents for the rest of her life, Uma finds no escape from her entrapment. Uma experiences, however, a brief repose of happiness and freedom once when she is allowed to accompany her ailing aunt, Mira-Masi, on her pilgrimage. During her stay at night in an ashram, Uma finds a strange link of her life with the barks and howls of the dogs:

> At night she lay quietly on her mat, listening to the ashram dog bark. Then other dogs in distant villages, out along the river bed and over in the pampas grass, or in wayside shacks and hovels by the highway-barked back. They howled long messages to each other. Their messages traveled back and forth through the night darkness which was total, absolute. Gradually the barks sank into it and drowned. Then it was silent. That was what Uma felt her own life to have been-full of barks, howls, messages, and now-silence.

At this juncture, one is reminded of Anita Desai's characteristic way of making her internally turbulent protagonists find expression by association with external surroundings. Thus, for instance, in Cry, the Peacock, Maya's feelings of isolation and longings are coupled with those of the crying of the peacocks. Still, one locates a kind of sublimity in the agonised inner cry of Maya when it is likened with peacocks. When Uma's pain is related to the barks and howls of dogs, the poetry of Maya's anguish is to be seen in sharp contrast to that of the excruciating poverty of Uma's entrapment. Catering to the whims and fancies of MamaPapa, but keeping her remorse selfcontained, at one point of the novel, Uma feels utterly friendless and alone, even when she is at home and surrounded by her MamaPapa. In desperation, she thinks of writing a letter to a friend to share her grief but it only ends up with the realisation that she has none to confide with:

> She could write a letter to a friend-a private message of despair, dissatisfaction, yearning; she has a packet of notepaper, pale violet with a pink rose embossed in the corner, but who is the friend? Mrs. Joshi? But since she lives next door, she would be surprised. Aruna? But Aruna would pay no attention, she is too busy. Cousin

> Ramu? Where was he? Had his farm swallowed him up? And Anamika-had marriage devoured her?.

However, it would be wrong to presuppose that Anita Desai shows Uma's unattractiveness, clumsiness and dullness of mind as causes for her entrapment. Uma's polar opposite, her graceful, beautiful and brilliant cousin, Anamika's confinement is more poignant. While Uma's failure in her school exams pressurises her to stay at home, Anamika does so excellently in her final school exams, that she wins a scholarship to Oxford. Yet, Anamika lives in a patriarchal society that considers higher education to be the prerogative of males, and marriage as the major preoccupation of females. The scholarship obtained is used only as a means to win her a husband who is considered an equal to the family's prestige. Anamica's parents are unperturbed by the fact that he is so much older than her, so grim-faced and conscious of his own superiority, and is "totally impervious to Anamika's beauty and grace and distinction".

But it is Anamica, who starts another life of entrapment the moment she enters her in-laws' house. Anamica's husband is a typical 'Mama's boy' to the extent he could be a silent witness to his mother's beating of his wife regularly. Anamica, who won scholarship to Oxford, spends her entire time in the kitchen cooking for a very large family that eats in shifts "first the men, then the children, finally the women". After a miscarriage, which followed a brutal beating, and the belief that she could not bear more children, finally, the family ties her up in a nylon saree, pours the kerosene over her, and burns her to death.

Here again Desai is not implying that the un-burnt brides and the well-settled ones may live a content life. In this regard, she portrays the story of Aruna, Uma's smart and pretty younger sister who makes a discreet choice and marries "the wisest, ... the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves".

Aruna's marriage to Arvind who has a job in Bombay and a flat in a housing block in Juhu, facing the beach is just a like a dream-cometrue. Yet to live that dream-life fully she transforms herself and desperately seeks to introduce change in the lives of others. She cuts her hair, takes her make-up kit wherever she goes, and calls her sister and mother as 'villagers' once they refuse to accept her sophisticated and flashy style of life. For that reason, she avoids visiting her parents' home and the rare occasions of her short visits are spent in blaming the untidiness of the surrounding and the inhabitants. Even she goes to the extent of scolding her husband when he splits tea in his saucer, or wears a shirt, which does not match, with his trousers.

In this way, Aruna's entrapment is different from the rest. She has liberated herself from the customs and dominating home rules that bind the rest of the characters like Uma and Anamica. Yet, in negating those codes, she ensnares herself in her mad pursuit towards a vision of perfection. And in order to reach that perfection she needs to constantly uncover and rectify the flaws of her own family as well as of Arvind's. When none other than Uma sees through the entrapment of Aruna, she feels pity for her:

> Seeing Aruna vexed to the point of tears because the cook's pudding had sunk and spread instead of remaining upright and solid, or because Arvind had come to dinner in his bedroom slippers, or Papa was wearing a t-shirt with a hole under one arm, Uma felt pity for her: was this the realm of ease and comfort for which Aruna had always pined and that some might say she had attained? Certainly it brought her no pleasure: there was always a crease of discontent between her eyebrows and an agitation that made her eyelids flutter, disturbing Uma who noticed it.

While Uma, Anamica, Aruna present the female versions of entrapment in Fasting, Feasting, Arun pictures the male version of it. Unlike his sisters, right from his birth, Arun desists eating the food of his family which is symbolic of its values. Much to the dismay of his father, he shows his preference for vegetarian food. Simply because it revolutionised the life-style of his father, Arun can not be forced to eat non-vegetarian food. This, of course, is a cause of disappointment for Papa:

> Papa was always scornful of those of their relatives who came to visit and insisted on clinging to their cereal and vegetable-eating ways, shying away from the meat dishes Papa insisted on having cooked for dinner. Now his own son, his one son, displayed this completely baffling desire to return to the ways of his forefathers, meek and puny men who had got nowhere in life. Papa was deeply vexed.

Nonetheless, Arun cannot fully come out of the clutches of Papa, especially, in terms of his education. And ironic enough, it is education, which instead of offering the desired autonomy, paves way for Arun's entrapment.

Papa, in order to give "the best, the most, the highest" education for his son, takes charge of Arun's life from his childhood. Although Arun's school examinations are over, Papa cannot allow him to go to his sister's house in Bombay during holidays, since he has planned that time for taking up entrance examinations and preparation for sending applications to go abroad for 'higher studies'. However, in the eyes of Aruna, her father's manic determination to get a foreign scholarship for Arun, is actually on account of his unfulfilled dreams, which he tries to impose on his son. That is why, when the letter of acceptance from Massachusetts finally arrives, it stirs no emotions in Arun:

> Uma watched Arun too, when he read the fateful letter. She watched and searched for an expression, of relief, of joy, doubt, fear, anything at all. But there was none.... There was nothing else-not the hint of a smile, frown, laugh or anything: these had been ground down till they had disappeared. This blank face now stared at the letter and faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by Papa.

As a reviewer rightly observes, "With a deft touch, Desai shows us that MamaPapa's ambitions for Arun are as stifling as their lack of ambition for Uma, ..." From America, Arun's letters come just to indicate his endurance and survival. His messages are diluted, and are devoid of any emotion and substance. "The most personal note he struck was a poignant, frequently repeated complaint: 'The food is not very good'.

The ties, though invisible, are so overwhelming that even in a country that feasts on individuality, Arun fails to manifest his identity as an individual. Caught in the prison house of his own family's food habits, he can neither nourish the alien food nor develop a sense of belonging with Patton's family that shelters him during his vacation. The smell of the raw meat being charred over the fire by Mr. Patton for steak or hamburger is loathsome for Arun. Conversely, Mr. Patton fails to understand why Arun really refuses to eat a good piece of meat.

While Mrs. Patton symphathises with Arun, and gives him the vegetarian food items, particularly tomato slices and lettuce on bread, Arun finds them detestable too. Because he thinks that "in his time in America he has developed a hearty abhorrence for the raw foods everyone here thinks the natural diet of a vegetarian". Hence when Mrs. Patton, quite satisfied with her job of a host, watches him eating with pride and complicity,

> Arun ate with an expression of woe and a sense of mistreatment. How was he to tell Mrs. Patton that these were not the foods that figured in his culture? That his digestive system did not know how to turn them into nourishment?

Where Mrs. Patton's daughter, Melanie, bluntly says she finds the food revolting, and refuses to taste it, Arun has to helplessly eat it. Melanie, however, suffers from bulimia, a disorder in which overeating alternates with self-induced vomiting, fasting, etc. Her bulimia, along with her mother's frenzy for buying food items to fill the freezer, signifies the consumerist society that she hails from, where excess becomes the malady.

This seen in contrast to Rod, the fitness fanatic, who spends all his time and energy in jogging, baffles Arun who wonders that "one can't tell what is more dangerous in this country, the pursuit of health or of sickness". He apprehends that like Melanie, who eats, vomits and lies on her vomit most of the time, the people of her country too, go through an inexplicable pain and a real hunger. Yet he cannot reconcile his mind to the unanswerable question: "But what hunger a person so sated can feel?".

Anita Desai, in portraying the stories of entrapment in Fasting, Feasting, presents one version after another; each contributing together to a master version, and each simultaneously subverting the other towards an open and contingent version. Accordingly, in the story of Uma, we find her unattractiveness leading to her eventual entrapment. Yet, if we pass a final verdict on this account, we would be proved erroneous since Desai presents the versions of Aruna and Anamica, Uma's appealing sister and charming cousin, respectively. Beauty cannot offer them escape from entrapments; in truth, it is rather their good looks that victimise them. Further, if we think again that it is Uma's lack of education that has led to her entrapped situation, Desai presents us the subversion of Anamica, where foreign scholarship fetches her an equal match but fails to provide her the required escape, it suffocates and kills her literally. In like manner, if as Uma thinks, "A CAREER. Leaving home. Living alone" would bring in the necessary freedom from entrapment, Desai presents us the story of Arun, who leaves home, lives alone for a career but feels the pangs of entrapment despite it.

Also, in providing a male version through the story of Arun's entrapment, Desai negates any feministic verdict based on the other female versions of entrapment that is likely to put the blame on the patriarchal, male-centred society. Thus, Anita Desai, often described as one of the finest writers of this country, has moved from her earlier, typical way of sympathising with her characters, females especially, to a different level of sensibility now. Where it would be easy to presuppose her overt feministic concerns in a novel like Cry, the Peacock, it would be unwise to approach her Fasting, Feasting with any such preconceived notions. Desai herself speaks out in a recent interview that she has been deliberately shifting her focus from female characters to male characters. She rather feels she needs to address and voice out themes which concern males too. She says:

> Specially in my earlier work I found myself addressing the same things over and over again: very much about the life of women, specially those women who are confined to home and family, also the solitude from which a person can suffer even if living within a big family or surrounded by crowds. But after several years and several books I began to feel suffocated myself by the confinement of these subjects. I felt I was limiting the territory to such an extent that it created a kind of suffocation even for me. So I deliberately opened the doors, to widen the canvas, and started writing more about male characters and their lives, because I felt they had a wider experience of the world, and I could address a greater variety of experiences.

Finally, if we consider the male version represented by Arun and the female versions constituted by Uma, Anamika and Aruna as Indian versions, Desai offers American versions to counter them. The story, thus dangling between two countries and cultures shows to prove through the characters of Uma and Arun, and their counterparts Melanie and Rod, that attempts of escape from entrapments can only be temporary, illusory and self-destructively futile since entrapments through familial knots are ubiquitous, all encompassing and universal. And perhaps the salvation comes when one accepts entrapment of one kind or another envisioned as an inescapable fact of life.

10

Anita Desai's Fasting, Feasting and the Condition of Women

Anita Desai is recognised as the first Indian author writing in English who addresses feminist themes seriously, focusing on the condition of women in India. Unlike Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandeya, for example, who respond primarily to the external social and political circumstances of their female characters, Desai concentrates on the exploration of the psychological condition of the oppressed heroines who, at first, are entirely passive. Bipin Panigrahi characterises aptly the conflict of Desai's characters as one "between reason and instinct, the will and reality, involvement and detachment".

The mastery of this insight can be observed, for example, in her novels Fire on the Mountain, Clear Light of Day (1980), or Cry, the Peacock (1980). Nevertheless, the 1980s see Desai's shift of interest from the female towards the male protagonists which carry with them themes classified traditionally rather as male-related, such as trade, raw deals, and mercenary motives of In Custody (1984), or, a big city, the clash of cultures, and the social bias as in Baumgartner's Bombay (1988) (see Lal 279-83).

Fasting, Feasting (2000), so far Desai's latest novel, is, above all, a work whose main concern is the condition of women in India and is related to women in general. To deal with the situation of women in India, however, it is impossible to stay simply with what is termed "feminism" in the Western sense. First, as Vrinda Nabar argues in her book Caste as Woman, "feminism hasn't even begun in any real sense in India", although what can be called the women's movement with its varying phases dates back roughly to the early nineteenth century. The Indian cultural and social setting is different from the West and Nabar explores the social and historical contexts of Indian cultural tradition, because, what is peculiar to India, is "the extent of the insistence on such discrimination, the preference given to boys over girls as being historically and traditionally prescribed and therefore indisputable". It is therefore necessary to "discredit some of the legacies of the tradition" both in the social consciousness and in the collective unconscious, to adopt a different (from the West) set of paradigms before any consciousness-raising and a consequent reform could take place.

Second, any relevant research concerning women should not depart from assumptions expressed by vague and simplistic notions such as "the third world women" or "Asian women." Such discourse, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns, would be Eurocentric and therefore based upon a paternalistic attitude and would create a "homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group" which would consider a specific group of women regardless of its ethnic, social, religious, and historical context. Fasting, Feasting is a novel which attempts to interconnect its two parts in one work and this aspiration can be called conveniently called "through difference to androgyny" (a phrase that would certainly please Virginia Woolf). The "difference" from which Desai departs is this: the first part is told as perceived by Uma, a female protagonist, and, characteristically, its prevalent setting is a domestic environment. As such it is a representation of the "accumulation of unrecorded life". On the contrary, the main hero of the second part, Uma's brother Arun, is put into a "larger world," an emblematically masculine environment.

In each part the respective sets of values and sensitivity associated with its main character can be observed. The "difference" is alluded to by Desai already in the title of her book: the words "fasting" and "feasting" can stand for the two parts of the novel respectively: the first is situated in India (the country of "fasting," which refers not only to the religious aspect, but also to an unwilling "fasting" of the many poor of the country and the second in the United States (the country of "feasting," abundance). However, there is an apparent difference (another one) as concerns the nature of perception of the two main personages. The "fasting" and the "feasting" of the individual characters is relative and multiple at the same time as perceived by the main protagonists of each part respectively.

So Uma, an Indian girl and when grown up an unmarried Indian woman who lives in the household of her parents, is, as compared to others, the one who is most "fasting" in the novel, mainly with respect to the access to education and the free development of personality. Continuously, as her awareness of her own hunger and suffering grows, she becomes sensitive also to the other characters' "feasting" (complete or partial) on power, freedom, and education. Her feelings are not paid any attention to within the family circle, at least not by her parents and "superiors" in the "fasting" part of the novel. It is only as Arun, the main protagonist of the second part, becomes aware of her suffering, he who himself, contrary to her, is (forced into) "feasting" as to education (and in the first part on the literal level, too), simply because he is a boy and he must receive "the best" in all respects, whether he wants it or not.

Arun's understanding is not automatic and immediate and is a result of a long process of perception and observation in relation to his childhood memories. His progress matches that of Uma, which, however, is subjective and therefore much more complex and painful, and will be described in larger detail, and it is in this sense that androgyny in Desai's novel is achieved: "The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her". As androgyny wants it, finally the minds of both siblings acquire unity, the same and new sense of reality which includes both the masculine and the feminine. Fasting, Feasting, is, nevertheless, above all a genuinely Indian novel. To understand this, the sophisticated pattern of the fabric of the novel, which determines the way the novel is built up around its main protagonists, must be disclosed. For this purpose it is necessary to work with structures which have been formed by the cultural tradition to which the novel belongs.

The imageries of sun, fire, and water, which constitute important spheres of interest in Hindu mythology and cosmology, seem a very convenient strategy to use and become the most significant factors in my analysis. While in both parts a double imagery (fasting-feasting and the sun-fire-water) is present, through Uma's perception the representations of sun, fire, and water become more elaborate. Understandably so, as she is the one who herself personally must work her way out of the landscape composed of these elements. It is she who suffers by the sun and fire and makes use of the beneficial nature of water. On the other hand, from the point of view of fasting and feasting, Uma's pilgrimage is that of hunger; the items of food are used more significantly as markers of Arun's journey.

Food being of significant importance in Indian culture, ways of disposing it have been strictly prescribed since the time of Manu (a supposed ancient law-giver, between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D.) and food has been closely related to matters of ritual, hierarchy, and worship. Thus, the motives of food are favoured and often employed by Indian authors. They have been used, for example, in many a Hindi short story and novel, such as in Oh Ram! These Children! (He Ram! Ye bacce!) by Yaspal or Rajendra Yadav's The Whole Sky (Sara akas) and appear in Indian works in English as well, e.g. in

R.K. Narayan's The Vendor of Sweets and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children. Food in modern Indian literature is used to stress the importance of what the particular literary work is dealing with and is often associated with social problems. In Fasting, Feasting this is particularly apparent when it concerns the introductory passages of each part respectively, which deal with the distribution of power and its hierarchy. The novel introduces to us an Indian contemporary middle class urban Hindu (most probably Brahman) nuclear (not joint) family.

These precisions are important because it is necessary to view each specific context with which we have to deal in its ethnic, social, religious, and historical perspective, especially so as it concerns the "Indian" society with its extremely varied and multiple features. The opening of the novel brings us into the middle of a domestic scene of the family, an environment that becomes representative of a hierarchy of power. The parents are on a garden swing, thinking over what they should have for tea. Their adult daughter Uma, who is packing a parcel for her brother, a shawl and tea, is summoned by her mother to tell the wish of the father to the cook. The pattern of the scene becomes a paradigm of the family hierarchy: its hardened features come out best in the description of the "orange ceremony." The patriarch on the top of the hierarchy pyramid, the one for whose enjoyment everything has to be arranged, does not even have to utter a word. The mother, a well-trained instrument of his power, reinforces the awareness of this power in the consciousness of the subject member by performing a ritual, which, for this purpose, has to be repeated regularly: "She taps Uma on the elbow. 'Orange,' she instructs her. Uma can no longer pretend to be ignorant of Papa's needs, Papa's ways. After all, she has been serving them for some twenty years. She picks out the largest orange in the bowl and hands it to Mama who peels it in strips, then divides it into separate segments. Each segment is then peeled and freed of pips and threads till only the perfect globules of juice are left, and then passed, one by one to the edge of Papa's plate. ... Mama sits back. The ceremony is over. She has performed it. Everyone is satisfied".

The shape and colour of the orange as well as the frequent repetition of the "s" consonant at the beginning of the words in the passage such as serving, separate, strips, segments, sphinx, sits, satisfied, status indicate the first important symbol in the imagery of the work, which is the sun. In the Hindu inner world the sun is often perceived as a negative, even deadly power, annihilating and devouring the living. Another group of words starting this time with the "p" consonant -- pass, picks, puts, pretend, peels, pith, pips, perfect, places, pursed, plate, pride, performed, Papa -- supporting thus what the passage tells us, indicates that this deadly power of the sun represents the patriarchy, its hierarchy, laws, structures, and operating principles. Only father is feasting on power as represented by the orange, neither the mother nor Uma have any access to the orange. As shown in the above quoted passage, the mother represents here the instrument of the patriarchal power, she is thus a part of the patriarchal structures, nevertheless just as an inferior agent; she is proud that at least pith, pips, and peels rest on her plate (whereas all the juicy parts have been absorbed by the father). Hence the circular structure of the family's patriarchy: PapaMama, MamaPapa. Everything departs from and comes back to Papa.

The ritual acquires here almost a religious quality. Aptly so, because as concerns religious practice, the rituals are viewed to serve the same important purpose, that is to reassure the members to stay safely within the bonds of their religion, specifically, when after some time faith becomes subject to questioning and doubts. After twenty years of serving her parents, Uma is no longer willing to take part in the ceremony, but her "good knowledge" of the ritual (based on its habitualness) makes her finally submit to it ("she can no longer pretend to be ignorant"). This is the first confusion as concerns the ritual, to intrigue people to act on the false assumption, that is on that of "knowledge" of the habit without any need to think. Uma thus stays within the realm of "Papa's needs, Papa's ways." That "Papa's needs" are put together with "Papa's ways" indicates another confusion or false assumption, because although these are certainly "Papa's ways," at least this characterisation refers again to the habitual nature of the ritual, while the performance has nothing to do with "Papa's needs." The third allusion to the deceptive ways of the rituals consists in the statement that "everyone is satisfied." Of course this is the greatest falsity of all. It is, however, in the interest of the fully satisfied to present the ritual as designed for everybody else to be satisfied as well.

In a remote part of the world an analogical introductory ritual is going on. This time it is an American patriarch who is presiding over the ceremony. It is a stifling hot American summer and the most important item of the ritual is fire. Here the preparation of a barbecue is described openly in religious terms and has its minister and also a congregation. It is an American setting viewed through Indian eyes therefore the image of the oppressive heat and sun has the same connotation as in the above described scene. The use of fire, which in terms of the Hindu cosmology symbolises a religious offering, has a complementary function here, and for our purposes it indicates that the exercise of the patriarchal power has violent and deadly effects on the affected individuals.

The members of the congregation, Mrs Patton, the "minister's" wife, and Arun, do not eat the sacrificial meat but they assist at the ceremonial presentation of it; for the time being they both remain safely within the power influence of patriarchal patterns. So Uma, her American counterpart Melanie, and other girls and women then find themselves in the oppressive environment of sun and fire where it is difficult to survive. Uma, taking care of her parents' household and having served them for many years, presents thus almost all the features of the Victorian archetype of angel in the house.

Almost, because she is not married and as such she is in fact a monster and viewed as such. It is certainly not by chance that this imagery comes to mind because, as Maria Mies states, "in the family ideology of the educated Indian middle classes Brahmanic ideals were combined with puritan-Victorian ones"; the ideal of womanhood issued from this combination is widely accepted even today.

Uma's behaviour, however, comes, before all, very close to how a pativrata (the ideal Hindu wife) is supposed to act, almost again, because she stays unmarried. In India, more than in Western cultures, a woman lives for the sake of others, namely for the sake of her husband. Nabar mediates to us Brhaspati's (a law-giver, between 300-500 A.D.) definition of pativrata: "she is someone whose state of mind reflects that of her husband. She shares his distress, his delight, grows sickly and dresses unattractively in his absence, and dies when he does". Within the huge body of Hindu mythology numerous representations exist of women called by different names, but "in each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving in her devotion to her lord. She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving. Even when spirited and brave, she adheres to the archetype: willing to go through fire and water, dishonour and disgrace for his sake". The goal and fulfilment of the woman's life is the marriage and the birth of (male) children: "Woman is created only to enable man to continue his species through sons and gods". This is deeply rooted in the Hindu socio-religious code as fulfilment of a woman's dharma (duty, law) and has a direct impact on the perception of her future lives representations.

An unmarried (and subsequently childless) woman has even a lower status than a widow. An unmarried woman living in the house of her parents can be neither a pativrata nor an angel, do what she will, and so she is condemned to be a monstrous outcast. The description is fitting: Uma, visualised as blinking her myopic eyes behind the thick glasses, is not found attractive either by her family or by any of the possible suitors and husbands-to-be. When still at school she fails almost all the exams, grown up she is often reprimanded for being childish, slow, and "always sleeping" (Fasting, Feasting-101).

To understand fully the essence and significance of both Uma's and Arun's pilgrimages we have to complete first the list of elements of which the landscape of their respective journeys is composed. We have already recognised the oppressive nature of sun and fire and their role as the representation of patriarchal order. This arrangement is static because it is convenient for the holders of power that the state of affairs remains as it is. In order to make the protagonists move and proceed, water as an element of transformation, or a change, perceived so by the Hindu imagery, and a counterpart to sun and fire is introduced. This Hindu perception of water will now necessitate a brief clarification before I proceed to a discussion on the function of water with respect to the respective journeys of Uma and Arun. The theme of water appears to be of primary importance within the huge body of Hindu cosmology.

The body so complex that for the purposes of this work I can attempt to present just its several simplified features: water is pivotal in the conception of the changing Hindu universe and as such also for the perception of the enigma of Existence. The burning desire to understand this enigma, which is also called the enigma of Vishnu's Maya, can be fulfilled only to a certain extent, and even that is a result of an incessant striving. Many a Hindu myth presents such efforts of two cosmic pilgrims, the sages Narada and Markandeya.

Their respective pilgrimages consist in reaching the understanding of something which under usual circumstances is beyond the horizon of perception. As such they can be regarded as mythical predecessors of Uma and Arun. Through immersion in water, Narada and Markandeya were finally able to experience "a totally different aspect," "the other (or the reversed) side" of what they could not see before; this is mirrored by Arun's pilgrimage. Having been enabled to live the life as different individuals, they were "initiated into the unconscious side of their own being," recognised their own hidden but still existing desires and attitudes, which is, as we will see, representative of the pilgrimage of Uma. On their journeys the two mythical sages are, in a similar way as their novel counterparts, also accompanied by fire, sun, or heat especially in connection with the transformation of personality by means of water.

Uma's pilgrimage, then, begins shortly after the birth of her brother Arun when she is in her early teens. "A son, a son," is heard everywhere in the house; when pronounced it can be confused with the sound of "sun." The atmosphere of the household is changing, Mama is proud to have fulfilled her life role by giving birth to a son, Papa is proud to have been able to produce, finally, a male offspring and lets Mama into the realm of patriarchal structures, although only as an instrument as pointed out previously. MamaPapa do not allow Uma, who has previously been sent to a Catholic convent school, to continue her education and she, although not a good student, is an eager one and opposes fervently her parents' decision. Now that there is a son in the family, "there is no need" (a famous phrase of Papa) to waste money and education as such on girls which will be necessary to spend on the boy.

Consequently, Uma feels she has to escape but she does not know yet exactly what for. It is the "secret chambers" of the inner world what Uma cherishes, for the outer world is dreary and grey. She is progressively introduced into the inner world of Hindu legends and tales by Mira-masi, an ardent worshipper of Shiva. Mira-masi's stories show the dual character of the woman's fate: one of the heroines is a victim, dies after having been abandoned by her husband; the other is a poetess, independent, struggling for recognition; in the meantime she is considered a madwoman (allusion to Mira-Bai, a legendary sixteenth-century's poetess and a

Krishna's devotee known for her rebellious attitudes). With Mira-masi, Uma feels that she is "admitted into some sanctuary that had been previously closed to her". The nuns at St. Mary's had not admitted her into their chapel, where she had always wanted to go. Now "she was counted in, a member, although of what, she could not say".

But there is then some progress for Uma; she realises that it is necessary to search for a different reality than that defined by her parents, yet she does not know where to turn. In the company of Mira-masi she has a feeling that at least she receives a certain attention and recognition as a person. The inner world of contemplation of existence is open to her. The inner structures of her culture are revealed to her so that she can better understand how they work. Further on, in another escapist action she undertakes with Mira-masi when they go to an ashram as pilgrims, she is free enough to think. While Mira-masi carries on her worship duties, Uma wanders around, feeling she is caught between two forces pulling in different directions, the power of patriarchal education and tradition, and the urge to get free of it. There is a river there but is not easy to approach during the day because the sand is burning from the sun. But towards the evenings Uma can walk along the river and she becomes sure that she cannot turn to Miramasi any more for guidance.

Uma stays unmarried but this does not mean that she is spared efforts to be married off, according to the custom of arranged marriages. She has to go a long and painful journey through this suntrap of the valley of marriage arrangements. To look at it more closely it will be useful first to follow how Desai compares Uma with the other two of her girl relatives. If Uma's sister Aruna is dismissed out of the sphere of patriarchal influence soon after the birth of Arun as "having started a lifetime of bridling, of determined self-assertion" and everything then in her life including her marriage she carries on with "a kind of steely determination, a dogged **ambitiousness**, that seemed to be born of a desperation", cousin Anamika, who manages to please everybody and is beautiful, meek, docile, and brilliant at school, becomes the true pativrata and the angel in the house. Actually, they are Uma's alter-egos or doubles; although in real life we could hardly imagine that Aruna's escape from the bonds of patriarchy would be so smooth and made possible only through her own determination, we can, however, accept it as an abstraction or a model.

Inside the realm of patriarchy the angelic features of Anamika become more expressive compared to the other two girls or rather reversely: she is too perfect so that she is to be perceived, rather, as an archetypal pativrata and even more so in contrast to Uma whose outcast and monstrous characteristics become also just a construct. Anamika has thus also become a model and consequently her fate is carried on to its utmost because to remain a pativrata a woman has to go as far as her own destruction. After twenty-five years of abusive treatment and enclosure as total as is hard to imagine in the house of her husband she literally has to go through fire (she is burned to death by her husband and mother-in-law). During the funeral ceremonies exercised for her, "the sun is rapidly turning from a small white disc like a shell in the sand to a shimmering blur like a fire in full daylight". And while Anamika is married off easily and rapidly, all efforts to marry the monster-girl Uma have to be stopped in the end. Poor Uma is not found beautiful by any of her suitors as if to show that the patriarchal order cannot support the "monstrosity" of "uglines" in women.

The importance which the "business" of marriage is dealt with in traditional Hindu culture makes it emblematic of the patriarchal order as such. Staying unmarried literally makes an outcast of Uma, because "Hindu marriage is a sacrament -- for the husband one among many, but for the wife the only one through which she can acquire spiritual gains.... If a grown up woman dies without this sacrament she roams about after her death as an evil spirit".

Nevertheless, for the time being and for Uma's sake, all this marriage-making ordeal has to stop as a similar one did for her mythical counterpart, also Uma, who carried on such a severe and long repentance to gain the heart of her husband that her mother had to stop her by exclaiming repeatedly "Oh, no!" ("Uma!") But does Uma's mother in the novel act in a similar way for her daughter's sake? If not, who does? Not in the interest of Uma, but because they are not willing to offer a third dowry, PapaMama or MamaPapa, these unified representatives of patriarchal order abandon any further marriage arrangements for Uma. She needs then another mother who would not be involved in the structures of patriarchy, not her mother in flesh. Such a spiritual mother would finally care for her needs and interests and we will see later on that there will be several such mothers. For the moment we can clearly distinguish the first of them as her literary mother Anita Desai who speaks up and says "Oh, no!" not only for Uma but for all the women oppressed by the law of patriarchy including the institution of marriage-making.

As the climax of Uma's journey is approaching it becomes more and more clear that what Desai considers in her novel as the worst patriarchal imposition on women is the enclosure in the sense of ignorance of "what is on the other side," the above mentioned kind of purdah. In Uma's case it is emblematic that she is, for one thing, suffering from an eye disease, and, for another, prevented to go and see an ophthalmologist. For the eyes are a primary means of getting to know, reading, studying, getting out of the bonds of ignorance (we also recall that she was prevented from continuing her school education). Uma's voyage towards the realisation finally of "what is on the other side," which coincides with the recognition of the earlier unconscious side of her being with the still living desires and attitudes hidden in the secret chambers of her inner person, is enabled by the escapist contacts with people more or less not infected by the germs of patriarchy or cured of them. They are indeed escapist because, always opposed by PapaMama as they are, they take place usually either out of home, or at home (e.g., on the phone) when PapaMama are not present. Nevertheless, after the years of silence, as if in a sleep, Uma finally reaches the secret chambers of her internal world. Having experienced the contact with the nuns in the convent school and with Mira-masi she finds in the chamber of her own room in the patriarchal home, which is, however, not a room of her own, scattered verses of her other mother.

The experience of having been invited to assist at minor charity affairs mediated further on by Mrs O'Henry and the nuns is the embodiment of this challenge and builds up the feelings of fulfilment and happiness for Uma. Appreciated and useful, "a member" of a community which works for someone's benefit, free from the patriarchal supervising of her parents Uma finds this experience comparable to that of the heavenly bliss. And now that same dark corner of Uma's inside, a very remote one, is occupied by the thoughts about a job, "a career." The offer of a job is finally made and the last necessary relevant explanations are furnished to Uma, but for all her overflowing eagerness to accept she has, nevertheless, to submit to MamaPapa's refusal. Obviously, the choice of the job messenger is not made by chance.

That Desai entrusts it to Dr. Dutt, who herself is an unmarried, educated Indian woman, has two aspects. First, this woman represents the most distinguished part of Uma's figurative collective mother who she constitutes together with the nuns, Mira-masi, Ella Wilcox, and Mrs O'Henry exactly because she embodies the "mother ideal," a "mother" who is a member of the same society and culture as Uma and who has been at the same time able to free herself of the bonds of its patriarchal structures. Besides that, it is interesting to note that in terms of the Hindu cosmology such a collective mother could be considered a justified representation of the life-sustaining aspect of the energy of Mother Goddess known through a number of identities and names.

Second, the presence of women like Dr. Dutt and their role co-creates the basis for the discussion of the outcome of the "Indian" part of the novel. As to Uma herself, in spite of all her hunger or desires, she is not yet capable of grasping the opportunity because she is not allowed to. Participating in the funeral ceremonies of her "married" alter-ego Anamika, she feels as if she too were cold ashes as having gone through fire, sacrificed as Anamika has been for and by the rules of patriarchy. The concluding passage presenting first the salutations and hymns to the sun culminates, however, with Uma pouring out of her jar "the murky water which catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire". Too much sun and fire remains here for any completely positive solution to be drawn.

The second part of the novel is presented as viewed by Arun and depicts Arun's figurative pilgrimage "to the other side." There is more relativisation there. In a country of abundance, there is feasting, but there is also fasting; from what point of view, and for whom? Feasting is there, but it is superficial, because it is just the two male characters, the father and the son of the American family, who are "feasting" both literally on the "carcasses" of beef (viewed so by the vegetarian Arun) and metaphorically on the "carcasses" to become of their female family counterparts, exactly because the patriarchal order has deadly effects on women. On the other hand, the female characters are feasting only seemingly; the mother supplies the household with tons of food but she herself does not know what to eat, and nobody cares. Her daughter Melanie suffers from bulimia, the emblematic disease of young women neglected emotionally; seemingly she is feasting on peanuts and candy bars, which, in reality, brings about starvation (fasting).

Arun himself, although receiving a first-class education, is starving because he has difficulties to adapt to the American "diet," both literal and metaphorical, the food and the American culture.

Understandably, the account of Melanie's and her mother's condition is not systematic sufficiently to constitute as detailed a journey as is that of Uma because it is conveyed as perceived by Arun. It is, rather, Arun's own pilgrimage and progress which we are invited to follow as the introductory passage tells: "It is summer. Arun makes his way slowly through the abundant green of Edge Hill as if he were moving cautiously through massed waves of water under which unknown objects lurked.

Greenness hangs, drips and sways from every branch and twig, and frond in the surging luxuriance of July. In such profusion, the houses seem as lost, as stranded, as they might have been when this was primeval forest". First, Arun's journey, as we can see, is set into the landscape of the American summer the paralysing effects of which are repeatedly mentioned in the novel and make it painfully palpable, the sun is described as ripe, there is dizziness, sweat, and the hotness of the summer is almost unbearable.

These representations of sun are soon to be accompanied by those of fire and so the basic items of the patriarchal background imagery have been assembled. "Arun makes his way slowly": it is with an immense sensitivity that Desai concentrates at the beginning of his journey and distinguishes between the acuteness of male perception of the inter-cultural bias and all its differences on the one hand (the most important emblems of the American culture as perceived by Arun are there, i.e., showy patriotism, relatively few people, cars and the urge to go as far as one can, jogging, advertisements, baseball matches, shopping and consumption), and Arun's dullness of groping his way through the tangle of interpersonal relationships on the other. Arun has to move cautiously because he meets objects about which he "knows nothing" as he makes his way as someone "venturing alone across the border". He finds himself in an unknown area, where he has never been before and he can only find his way to the recognition of the unknown objects or "the other side" of the border by moving through the "masses of water." So the pilgrim Arun has to make a journey analogical to that of Uma.

It is the journey towards recognition, but this recognition is and at the same time is not the same as that of Uma. It is the same because in both cases it is the recognition of the unfavourable condition of women, their suffering, and the necessity to act for their benefit. In this respect it can also be said that it is complementary. And the recognition cannot be exactly the same because Uma is affected directly as she is exposed to the mortifying effects of the patriarchal sun and, as we have seen, her pilgrimage is a journey towards the recognition of the inside. That is also why Desai, although using the same imagery of sun, fire, and water in both parts, changes its perspective with respect to Arun's view and makes the imagery of food in the second part more prominent than in the first.

Arun's pilgrimage approaches its climax when he finally recognises Melanie's suffering and its cause. It is the recognition of the "other side," of the "object" so far unknown and as such it becomes almost a kind of enlightenment: "Then Arun does see a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty. But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference?".

Nevertheless, neither he nor Mrs Patton, herself a victim incapable of resisting the paralysing effects of the beams of patriarchal sun, are capable of doing anything for Melanie until the three of them escape temporarily the oppressive heat of the family's males' presence. Then, at the pool, enlightenment and discovery finally start to work for Melanie's benefit. A cooperation of two complementary agents is necessary: Arun, although he is well aware of the real state of affairs and acknowledges the necessity to act, is "paralysed" as to action, he is unable to do anything himself. On the other hand, Arun's presence seems necessary for Mrs. Patton to discover finally the destructive consequences of Melanie's condition. As mother she is capable to act, although she ignores the true character of her daughter's suffering. Later, when on the point of Arun's leaving the Pattons' house, emblems of patriarchal hierarchy from his parents arrive (packed by Uma), a packet of tea and a shawl "to keep him warm" through the winter, Arun's luggage is already packed. He decides not to take the presents with him; he has all he needs and he has no space for the additional weight of the "patriarchal baggage." Mrs Patton seems quiet, placated, it is with her that these emblems are to be left, it is where they belong.

It is another component of Arun's recognition that even here, in the country of "the other side," the hierarchy of the patriarchal structures has not yet been overcome. Finally, the climax of Arun's pilgrimage together with the outcome of the first part of the novel (Uma's pilgrimage) tells us clearly that the possibilities of woman to escape the suffering in the bonds of patriarchy depend essentially both on recognition and action, i.e., the capability of taking an action. First, the recognition of her "inside chamber" is necessary for the woman to understand her condition. Her suffering must then be recognised by those who are around her and especially by those who would have capability (power) willingness to act for her benefit (as in the case of Melanie, who is not yet an adult woman and who has not yet acquired self-recognition). Uma, on the other hand, who has gone all the way of her pilgrimage to selfrecognition, is an adult and therefore she can act for herself; yet perhaps the traditional bonds of the Indian family are too strong to severe the ties all of a sudden.

Arun, who has reached the recognition of the womens' condition as "from across the border" from the "other side," can do something helpful, not for Melanie because his position in the American home does not allow him to, but certainly for Uma when he comes back (if he does) to India, exactly because he is a male part of her family, "the power and the potential to change being considered a male prerogative". Then the two complementary elements of female self-recognition and male capacity of action supported by the recognition of the "other side" may produce finally some desirable effects, in a similar way as the two parts of the novel, the female-centred part and that of the male perception, are complementary to each other.

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Male and Female Characters in Anita Desai's in Custody

Anita Desai is by now firmly established as the preeminent Indian novelist of her generation, and the writing mirrors the woman to a quite remarkable degree. When you first encounter it, the prose seems to whisper, to speak so softly as to risk going unheard, but as you bend your ear to listen, you hear many unexpected notes of wicked comedy, of sharp, even biting perceptions about her fellow men and women, and of a clear-sighted unsentimentality about human nature that is anything but frail. The voice takes hold of the reader, gently, irresistibly, and its strength and clarity soon come to seem like small miracles.

In an age when writers are often clumsily grouped together by ethnic origin, or language, or corralled into the ghettoes of ideology and gender, it is easy to forget the trans-national, trans-lingual, and indeed trans-sexual nature of all great literature, in whose frontierless landscape R. K. Narayan's Malgudi is in the same neighbourhood as William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Macondo, closer to those places, indeed, than to any place in India; and thanks to the translations commissioned by the Argentine publisher Victoria Ocampo, a generation of Latin American writers was reared on the works of Rabindranath Tagore.

Until the publication of In Custody, one might have said that the subject of Anita Desai's fiction was solitude. Her most memorable early creations, the old woman, Nanda Kaul, in Fire On The Mountain (a novel to which her daughter Kiran's The Inheritance of Loss owes an immense artistic debt), or Bim in Clear Light Of Day, were isolated, singular figures. Those books themselves felt like private universes, illuminated by their author's perceptiveness, delicacy of language and sharp wit, but remaining, in a sense, as solitary, as separate, as their characters.

In Custody was, therefore, a novel of transformation for its author, a doubly remarkable piece of work because, in this magnificent book, Anita Desai chose to write not of solitude but of friendship, of the perils and responsibilities of joining oneself to others rather than holding oneself apart. And, at the same time, she wrote, for the first time, a very public fiction, shedding the reserve of the earlier books to take on such sensitive themes as the unease of minority communities in modern India, the new imperialism of the Hindi language, and the decay that, now even more than when the book was written, was and is all too tragically evident throughout the fissuring body of Indian society. The courage of the novel is considerable, and so is its prescience. The slow death of my mother tongue, Urdu, is much further advanced than it was 23 years ago, and much that was beautiful in the culture of Old Delhi has slipped away for ever.

The story contrasts the slow death of a false friendship and the painful birth of a true one. Deven, a lover of Urdu poetry who has been obliged to teach Hindi in a small-town college for financial reasons, is bullied by his boyhood chum Muras to go to Delhi and interview the great, ageing Urdu poet Nur Shahjehanabadi for Murad's rather ridiculous magazine. The relationship between the weak, unworldly Deven and the posturing bully Murad seems at first like something out of Narayan. But Narayan's meek characters usually stand for traditional India, while his bullies represent some aspect of the modern world. In Custody has no such allegorical intentions. Murad's appalling behaviour, he all but ruins Deven while appearing to help, wasting money on a poor tape recorder for the interview, then arranging for an incompetent 'assistant' who completely fouls up the recording, and finally refusing to settle the bills arising from the event, makes the fine, unsentimental point that our friends are as likely to destroy us as our enemies.

In the film Ismail Merchant made of In Custody, probably his finest effort as a director, the roles of Nur the poet and Deven the acolyte are sensitively played by two great actors, Shashi Kapoor and Om Puri. And yet, the film's casting does in part undermine the novel's vision. Nur's body 'had the density, the compactness of stone. It was large and heavy not on account of obesity or weight, but on account of age and experience,' Anita Desai writes. This was not exactly true of his movie incarnation, Shashi Kapoor, but the beauty of Kapoor's spoken Urdu did much to make up for the physical differences. The biggest problem in the film is that the age gap between Kapoor and Puri is not wide enough. The novel contrasts youth and experience; the film sets greatness against greenness, but by narrowing the generation gap it loses a dimension.

And the novel's emotional heart lies in this relationship. At first the young teacher's dream of the literary giant appears to have come true. Then, superbly, we are shown the great man's feet of clay: Nur beset by pigeons and by other, human, hangers on; Nur gluttonous, Nur drunk, Nur vomiting on the floor. Here allegory perhaps is intended. 'How can there be Urdu poetry,' the poet asks rhetorically, 'when there is no Urdu language left?' And his decrepitude -- like the derelict condition of the once-grand ancestral home of Deven's fellow-lecturer, the Muslim Siddiqui is a figure of the decline of the language and culture for which he stands. The poet's very name, Nur, is ironic. His is a 'light' grown very dim indeed.

Once again, however, the point being made is not allegorical. The beauty of In Custody is that what seems to be a story of inevitable tragedies the tragicomedy of Deven's attempt to get his interview being the counterpoint to the more sombre tragedy of Nur's slide towards oblivion turns out to be a tale of triumph over these tragedies. At the very end, Deven, beset by crises, hounded by Nur's demands for money (for a cataract operation, for a pilgrimage to Mecca), understands that he has become the 'custodian' both of Nur's friendship and of his poetry, and that meant he was the custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit. It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure.

Once Deven has understood this, the calamities of his life seem suddenly unimportant. 'He would run to meet them,' and he does.

The high exaltation of such a conclusion is saved from becoming merely lush by Anita Desai's wholly admirable dryness of manner. Her vision is unsparing. Urdu may be dying, and her novel may in part be a lament for that death, but nevertheless in the character of Siddiqui she shows us the worst side of Urdu/ Muslim culture -- its snobbishness, its eternal nostalgia for the lost glory of an early Empire. And, most significantly, we see while Deven may be willing to embrace his responsibilities to Nur, he utterly fails to do likewise with Nur's wife or his own. He feels too threatened by the former even to read her poetry, and is too careless of his own poor Sarla with her faded dreams of fan, phone, frigidaire to build any sort of real relationship with her at all.

That Anita Desai has so brilliantly portrayed the world of male friendship in order to demonstrate how this, too, is a part of the process by which women are excluded from power over their own lives is a final, bitter irony behind what is an anguished, but not at all a bitter book.

The most common themes in Anita Desai's novels is human relationship particularly the man-woman relationship. Nowadays this theme is becomes more important due to rapid industrialisation, growing awareness among women of their rights and individualism and the westernisation of attitudes and lives of the people. D.H. Lawrence points out:

> The great relationship for humanity will always be the relationship between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary. (D.H. Lawrence, 130)

Twentieth century novelists treat this subject in a different manner from .that of earlier novelists. They portray the relationship between man and woman as it is, whereas earlier novelists concentrated on as it should be. The modern writer is concerned with the quality of life and people, with world and value. His investigation of a number of unsatisfying lives has to its basis in the deep conviction that it is man's sacred duty to fight for a life that will express the inherent dignity and worth that, he is capable of. He is aware of that pain, pathos, and failure but sure of the values of the struggle towards fulfillment and perfection. (Harrison Christopher, 82-85)

Indo-English writer is constantly concerned with the problem of interaction between man and woman, between the individuals and the social world. Her main concern is to depict the psychic states of her protagonists at some crucial juncture of their lives. Therefore, the most recurrent themes in her novels are "The hazards and complexities of man-woman relationships, the founding of individuality and the establishing of individualism of her characters".

Anita Desai is a modern indo-English writer, widely acclaimed, not only in India but also in the world of fiction writing. she emerged on the literary horizon after independence, focusing on the contemporary issues. Anita Desai has added a new dimension to the contemporary Indian English fiction. She has secured a unique and significant place due to her innovative thematic concerns and deals in her fiction with feminine sensibility. Her preoccupation is explored of deep psych of her characters.

The fiction of Anita Desai is relevant to all times because she writes about the predicament of modern man. She digs in to man inner psych and goes beyond the skin and the flesh. Literature for her is not a means of escaping reality but an exploration and an inquiry. She prefers the private to the public world and avoid from the traditional grooves of external reality and physical world. In fact, her real concern is the exploration of human psyche, inner climate, and she unravels the mystery of the inner life of her characters.

Thus, the most common themes in her novels is the complexity of human relationships, particularly the man-woman relationship. She writes mostly about the miserable plight of women suffering under their insensitive and inconsiderate husbands, fathers and brothers. So man-woman relationship brings characters into alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, isolation and lack of communication that frequently occurs in her novels. Most of her novel's protagonists are alienated from the world, from society, from families, from parents and even from their own selves because they are not average people but individuals. When these characters have to face alienation, they become rebels.

Tension, worries, depression, disappointment, anxiety and fear become their lot and they lose their sense of sanity and mental poise, for example Maya in Cry, the Peacock, Sita in where shall we go this summer? And Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain. Some characters like Monisha and Nanda Kaul are unable to reconcile to alienation and meet with a tragic end.

The uniqueness of Anita Desai's fiction lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility. In India where women have redesigned role, which does not allow any room for individualism, identity and assertion, Anita Desai talks of women who question the age old traditions and want to seek individual growth. They try to reassess the known in a new context and find a meaning in life. Desai suggests that a balance between the conventional, pre-set role of women and the contemporary issues has to be struck. Her female protagonists try to discover and rediscover meaningfulness in life through the known, the established. These characters are not normal but different from others. They do not find a proper channel of communication and thus become alienated and start brooding about their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding, which they had formerly ignored or rejected.

Most of her protagonists are alienated ones. She portrays her characters as individuals "facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence."

Thus, Characters in her novels are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive and engage with their dreams and imagination and alienated from their environments. They often differ in their opinion from others and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence. That is why that they suffer of their relationships more than others do.

The novel Cry, the Peacock, is mainly concerned with the theme of disharmony between husband and wife relationship. Desai looks in to the reasons for marital discord and illustrates how such discord effects the family. Sometimes, the inability of an individual to be responsive to the behaviour patterns of her partner leads to strain and tension in the relationship, while sometimes it is on account of varied levels of sensitivity that strained relationships occur. In this novel Maya and Gautama have strained relationships because of their incompatible temperature. Maya is dreamy, sensitive and emotional, while Gautama realistic, insensitive and rational. Maya is poetic and high-strung Gautama detached, philosophical and remote. Maya has tenderness, softness and warmth, Gautama is hard and cold.

The matrimonial bonds that bind the two are very fragile and tenuous, the growing tension between them reaches its climax when Maya kills Gautama and then commits suicide.

Maya is a prisoner of the past, lives almost perpetually in the shadow world of memories, which engulf her, Guatama lives in the present and accepts reality and facts even though they are not very beautiful. On the contrary, Maya never tries to accept the facts, but she wants to live in her imagination and fairy world. She keeps on remembering her childhood days or the treatment her father meted out to her. She is a father obsess means; she feels that no one else loves her as her father did. She seeks other father in her husband. But he does not respond her. Sensitive Maya is terribly upset at the death of her dog that she loses her mental calm and Gautama neglects emotional yearning of Maya and says that he would bring another dog for her. This mechanical behavior makes Maya brood over Gautama`s insensitivity:

> Showing how little he knows of my misery, or how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneat, the blue flashing veins that ran under and out of the bridge gold… telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another though to me…it is his hardness, no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me.

In Voices in the City, Anita Desai's concern is primarily with human relationships and how in the absence of meaningful relationships the individual suffer. She probes the psychic compulsion that may effect an individual in forging long term and significant relationships and how an individual is effected if he is unable to forge such relationships.

Nirode, one of the main characters, is obsessed with the relationship of his mother with major Chadha and considers her a she-cannibal. She is having an affair in Kalimpong which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Nirode's relationship with his mother is a love-hate relationship. We have veiled suggestions of his mother fixation and according to psychologists' hatred often is a defense mechanism of the psyche to stop one from committing incest. If Maya`s tragedy in Cry ,the Peacock emanated from her obsession with a father figure, Nirodo`s tragedy lies in his love-hate relationship with the mother.

The novel also deals with the incompatible marriage of Monisha and Jiban. Monisha's husband , is the prisoner of conventional culture. He believes that a woman's most important roles besides child bearing are cooking, cutting vegetables, serving food and brushing small children's hair under the authority of a stern mother-in-law. Monisha feels that her privacy is denied to her. Her husband is busy with his middle rank government job with no time for Monisha and no desire to share her feeling.

The theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-children relationship which itself is a consequence of dissonance in husband-wife relationship. Monisha leads an equally fragmented and starved life. She is alienated from his mother as well as her husband. The graph of her mental life can be constructed from her long searching and self-confronting entire in the diary. Her relationship with her husband is characterised only by loneliness and lack of communication. He reckons his wife as worth nothing in consequence. He does not bother to ask his wife, when he finds some money missing from his pocket even.

Monisha's ill matched marriage, her loneliness, sterility and stress of living in a joint family with an insensitive husband push her to breaking point. The element of love is missing in her life and finally she commits suicide.

In Where Shall We Go This Summer? Anita Desai chooses marital discord as the subject matter of this novel and highlights how the inability to lay bare one's soul and express freely one's fear and anguish result in the snapping of communication between husband and wife. Different attitudes, individual complexes and fears add to this distancing between the husband and the wife resulting in conjugal disharmony.

Raman and Sita have irreconcilable temperaments and attitudes to life. The ill-assorted couple of Raman and Sita are confronted with the same problem of husband-wife discord. Sita represents a world of emotion and feminine sensibility while Raman is a man with an active view of life and the sense of the practical.

Sita is a nervous, sensitive middle-aged woman with explosive and emotional reactions to many things that happen to her, she always wants to escape reality and does not want to grow up and face the responsibilities of adult life. On the contrary, Raman represents the prose of life. He represents sanity, rationality and an acceptance of the norms and values of society. He is unable to understand the violence and passion with which Sita reacts against every incident. His reaction to his wife's frequent outbursts is a mixture of puzzlement, weariness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality. He cannot comprehend her boredom, her frustration with her.

In this novel theme of alienation and lack of communication in married life is discussed by writer. Sita finds herself alienated from her husband and children. She remains an ignored personality since childhood. She is the product of broken family. She yearns to have the attention and love of others but her father remains busy with his chelas and patients. Even after marriage, she remains lonely. Her husband also is busy. He fails to fulfit her expectation. As a result, there is marital discord, tension between husband and wife.

In Clear Light of Day Desai treats other form of man-woman relationship in her novel. Bim carries a childhood image of her brother Raja-romantic, poetic, dreamy, whereas Raja is rational, pragmatic and materialistic. She gets angry about Raja as she feels that he does not reciprocate towards her feeling normally because during childhood they had close emotional relationship which she feels as an adult Raja is shunning.

Bim is Raja's admirer and she encourages him in every act and ambition. They want to be the heroin and the hero when they grow up and go away into the big world. Away from their old parental home. In this way, they have greater mental and temperamental affinity with each other than with the other brother and sister. Both of them are bold, independent and possess a fiery impetuous spirit. When raja is sick, Bim takes care of him with love and devotion thinking that he would take her father's place the day he recovers. However, to her utter dismay, when Raja gets well, he decides to go away to a distant place.

I will go- go to- to Hyderabad. Hyder Ali Sahib asked me to come... I have to begin my life sometime, don't i? You don't want me to spend all my life down in this hole, do you? (clear light of day, 95)

And Raja runs away to Hyder Ali and marries Benazir, his daughter. Then he left Bim alone with Baba in the crumbling house. Raja abdicates his responsibility towards Bim and Baba entirely. So, their relationship changes. Tara, too later on understands the significance of time and comes to realise how human relationship even the intimate relationship between a brother and a sister, changes with the passage of time. Raja never recalls the old days, the love and sacrifice of Bim, her taking care of his health.

Therefore, Bim is treated most cruelly by her brother. Utterly neglected and treacherously deserted, Bim muses painfully on how the passage of time has ravaged the old relationships of childhood and created a changed pattern of relationship in the family. So, after a long span of time, Bim decides to patch up with Raja who was probably not even conscious of the hurt his letters have caused Bim. She purges herself of the intense hatred for ultimately she realises. "No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much in which to grow and spread" than she felt for her family. She wakes up her dreamy world of past in the clear light of day to mend her relations with her brother.

In Fire on the Mountain, Anita Desai probes the feminine sensibility and a woman's inherent desire to know herself in terms of not only her relationship with her family but also in terms of her individual identity and its relationship with the world at large. In the novel, Nanda Kaul and her husband prof. Kaul do not have a warm relationship. He has cared little for his wife and family. He carried a life long affair with another woman. Nanda could not belong to the family and her position is no better than a house keeper. Her husband is responsible for this. He is such a coward that he could not marry a Christian lady because he could not dare break social conventions. Outwardly, the Kaul's are an ideal couple for university community but from inside their relationship is all-barren.

Novel shows Desai's tragic vision of life, in which the innocents suffer. They pay a heavy price for their sincerity and innocence, as ordained by an unkind fate.

In Custody, focuses on theme of marital discord and relationship problem. In this novel, Deven and Sarla lead an unhappy marital life. They are quite different from each other in their temperaments. Deven is a Hindi lecturer in a college and Sarla has no interest in literature. She is ignorant that she concludes her husband's frequent visits to Delhi for meeting his girl friend. Sarla is a picture of an abandoned wife.

To conclude, Anita Desai presents to reader her opinion about complexity of human relationships as a big contemporary problem and human condition. So, she analyses this problem due to shows changing human relationships in her novels. She is a contemporary writer because she considers new themes and knows how should to deal with them.

Anita Desai takes up significant contemporary issues as the subject matter of her fiction while remaining rooted in the tradition at the same time. She explores the anguish of individuals living in modern society. Desai deals with complexity of human relationships as one of her major theme, which is a universal issue, as it attracts worldwide readers to her novels. She strives to show this problem without any interferes. In other hand, she allows to her readers who have their judgment about her novel's characters and their actions.

Like Fernando's Three Women, Anita Desai's In Custody criticises traditional society, but her novel focuses on a pathetic, trapped male character whose wife despises his inability to succeed financially. A terrified, insignificant person, Deven moves from mediocrity as a college lecturer to impending professional and financial ruin as he incurs increasing monetary debts, which he finally decides to endure rather than committing suicide. His wife gives him little support -- in fact, the women in the book seem rather nasty, especially the enraged young wife of Deven's hero, the poet Nur. As the story progresses, however, Desai makes clear that just as the male characters are trapped in a world that offers no possibility for success, the female characters have even more right to feel frustrated with a sexist society that reduces them to clinging to these men who cannot provide them with what they want.

Unlike the evil Kunthi from Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve, Desai's characters seem justified when they act out of self-preservation. Furthermore, unlike Markandaya's Rukmani and Ira who appear justified for their rebellion yet suffer punishment anyway, Fernando and Desai's women successfully defy traditional mores. The Urdu poet's young wife in Desai's In Custody, who rages at her limitations and writes in her own defense, stands out as the most outrageous of these woman. In fact, she radically redefines her experience by insisting on telling her story.

This character's self-justification has continued in recent years as women writers tell their own stories and that of other women. When women make the lives of real women the center of their books, they go beyond creating sympathetic female characters to making claims for an alternative reality, an alternative truth. The illicit, self-interested qualities so condemned in earlier fiction become liberating, positive, and creative forces.

Desai shocks us near the end of her novel when she presents Nur's young wife's point of view in a letter to Deven, in which the woman claims that Nur married her because of her "gifts and abilities," not because of sexual entrapment as had been assumed throughout the novel. She challenges him to read her enclosed Urdu poems:

> Let me see if you are strong enough to face them and admit to their merit. Or if they fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger, danger that your superiority to women may become questionable. . . . Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation, and achievement, while I, because because I was born a female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? Is it not you who has made me play the role of the loose woman in gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously and giving me just that much regard that you would extend to even a failure in the arts as long as the artist was male?

Deven's timidity prevents her defiant letter from gaining her acceptance in the world of Urdu poetry. Frightened of having to "enter that world on a mission of mercy or rescue," he tears up her poems. But her angry statements make the reader reevaluate what they previously had only seen through the eyes of a male character. By making women's frustration understandable, Desai subverts her book's primarily unsympathetic portrayals of women which turn out to have been Deven's not the author's perceptions.

But in fact, Desai does more than simply subvert a male society's attitude towards women, since she portrays a flawed Sita-like image in her main male character, not her female ones, who are too disillusioned and angry to want to fulfill self-sacrificing ideals. First of all, Deven suffers bitterly throughout In Custody because he has too weak a character and personality to refuse the burdens others place upon him. Second, whereas Nur's wife gains respect as a character by asserting her rights and abilities, Deven never manages such fiery rebellion. In contrast, he becomes noble at the end of the book by taking upon himself tremendous responsibilities: "He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit.

It was a great distinction. He could not deny or abandon that under any pressure." Only as Deven decides to accept and endure whatever disasters befall him does he reach a kind of graceful inner strength: "Soon the sun would be up and blazing. The day would begin, with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them".

12

Figuring the Maternal: Freedom and Responsibility in Anita Desai's Novels

I come from a country which prides itself on the fact that ever since it won independence from a colonial power in 1947, it has been a democracy… I cannot, however, claim that there is no suppression in India… There is a secret connivance at the taking away of freedom . . . for which a whole society, and its entire history with its burden of custom and tradition must be indicted.

In the novels of Anita Desai, freedom entails responsibility; an independent nation should acknowledge its role in the continuation of such repressive practices as the silencing of women. Women themselves must recognise their own collusion in the process of their subjugation, Desai declares in "A Secret Connivance," citing the creation of multiple cults around the Mother Goddess, "that fecund figure from whom all good things flow.... In each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving i n her devotion to her lord. She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful, and forgiving. Even when spirited and brave, she adheres to the archetype: willing to go through fire and water, dishonour and disgrace for his sake".

"Questioning the myth" of the Mother Goddess, which has such a powerful hold on the public imagination is a daunting enterprise. Nevertheless, this seems to be Desai's selfassigned challenge in her fictional experiments with alternative versions of the idea of the maternal. The figure of the mother emerges in her novels as a sign of multiple possibilities, a trope with both repressive and emancipatory potential.

This chapter examines representations of the maternal in three novels-Where Shall We Go This Summer? , Clear Light of Day (1980), and Journey to Ithaca (1995) as a way of interpreting Desai's exploration of the complex relationship between freedom and responsibility. From biological motherhood as a restrictive condition in Where Shall We Go This Summer? to surrogate mothering as a limited though meaningful mode of agency in Clear Light of Day, to the assumption of the role of spiritual "Mother" as a position of power outside the domestic sphere in Journey to Ithaca, the idea of the maternal undergoes dramatic shifts, serving as a mode of cultural critique as well as a visionary projection of female self-empowerment through a reappropriation of the myth of the Mother Goddess. Desai tends to dissociate herself from any overt engagement with the women's movement, but her constructions of the maternal invite feminist interpretation, because they constitute a challenge to traditional representations of female subjectivity.

In the early part of this century, the colonialist projection of motherhood was perhaps best represented by the imperialist rhetoric of Katherine Mayo's Mother India, which argued for the urgent need to "rescue" Indian women from barbaric social practices. Opposed to this was the nationalist construction of the Indian woman as the embodiment of a spiritual, essentialised "Indianness." Both narratives sought to construct a homogenised, abstract figure of "woman," to serve the needs of their respective political agendas, without any real concern for the divergent needs of actual women in different sectors of Indian society. The Gandhian identification of national freedom with women's freedom created an ambiguous situation where the contours of the struggle for women's emancipation came to be defined by the demands of the nationalist struggle for independence.

After Independence, the role of women activists became restricted, more or less, to the field of social welfare. Typically, the middle-class educated Indian woman was encouraged to perceive herself as the ideal homemaker, who, unlike her Western counterparts, would devote the benefits of her modern education to the service of her family. In the definition of ideal womanhood which evolved in the decades following Independence, the elision of femininity and maternity was a determining feature. As Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah point out, " in India, women's self-worth and value are usually dependent on their reproductive functions". This valorisation of motherhood has its own built-in paradoxes: maternity is associated with a capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice which entitles the mother to her quasi-divine status. It is this reified image of maternity that Desai's texts seek to challenge in a variety of ways. In Where Shall We Go This Summer?, Sita's attempt to defer the moment of childbirth expresses a desire for control over her own body and, by implication, her destiny. Mira Masi and Bim, in Clear Light of Day, embody Desai's attempt to separate the task of mothering from the biological functions of pregnancy and childbirth. The title assumed by the Mother in Journey to Ithaca is presented in terms of its symbolic ramifications, extending the idea of the maternal beyond the prescribed limits of home and family.

In the shadowy penumbra surrounding Desai's protagonists hover numerous absent, negligent, or "lost" mothers, whose abdication of the nurturing role suggests negative attitudes inadmissible in hegemonic cultural narratives. Also present is the figure of the mother who enjoys the power of parental discipline as an opportunity to exercise an authority denied her in other areas of her life. In all three novels, the maternal becomes the site for the articulation of the female desire to determine one's own identity, in confrontation with traditional inscriptions of the mother's body as a means of controlling female subjectivity.

A double-edged irony informs Desai's narrativisation of this desire. The critique of societal norms implicit in her representations of the mother is offset by a rejection of versions of freedom that are either escapist or solipsistic. The female protagonists of these texts are women whose quest for independence leads to a recognition of the futility of the attempt to sever the ties that connect them with others. This knowledge creates a mood of acceptance, facilitating a willingness to resume a responsible role attuned to one's particular circumstances.

Desai's characters are not projected as representative of a homogeneous category; they testify to the heterogeneity of female experience, and the need to recognise the situatedness of all frames of oppression as well as all modes of resistance. As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, there is no attempt in Desai's novels to create a pan-Indian identity, although the characters are "culturally defined" by their location, attitudes, and memories. In Journey to Ithaca, the central characters are not Indian, although India continues to function as a catalyst in the dramatic changes that overtake their lives. Realism is a mode Desai had once rejected in favour of the "language of the interior"; but as her recent statements indicate, this does not imply a blindness to the writer's social role:

> I think society is always rather uncomfortable when it has a writer in its midst because the writer is thought of as a critic or as a satirist, or else somebody that uncovers uncomfortable truths. . . . I think a writer has to assume that role although it's not given to him. He has to seize it and cling to it and hold on to it. . . . It is considered a particularly unseemly role for a woman to play.

As a critic of society, the writer may, however, choose non-realistic narrative modes. Without overt recourse to fantasy or magic realism, Desai's novels, especially Journey to

Ithaca, include a visionary dimension suggestive of epistemological modes that are intuitive rather than rational. Her novels also assert their literariness through complex intertextual engagement with texts from diverse sources. These features do not constitute a rejection of the "real"; they demand a recognition that the real may be negotiated, by the fiction-writer, in more ways than one. Where Shall We Go This Summer? is the story of Sita, a pregnant woman terrified of bringing her fifth child into what she perceives as a violence-riddled world. The text presents her overwrought mental condition as the cumulative outcome of a difficult childhood followed by a stressful marriage. Neglected by their father, a committed freedom fighter, and deserted when very young by their mother, Sita and her siblings, Jivan and Rekha, are "flower children of the independence movement," deprived of a normal family life:

> Sita had imagined she came into the world motherless-and the world was crowded enough so . . . she belonged, if to anyone, to this whole society that existed at that particular point in history-like a lamb does to its flock-and saw no reason why she should belong to one family alone.

After Independence, they move to the house on the island of Manori, where Sita suffers loneliness and neglect, under the shadow of a talented elder sister whose closeness to their father carries incestuous overtones. The father, a charismatic personality, becomes a cult figure among the local villagers, compelling their participation in his vision of Manori as a pre-industrial idyll. Domination, silence, and a sense of betrayal haunt Sita's relationship with her father. When he dies, the absence of usual family bonds becomes apparent in the rapidity with which the siblings part company.

Sita marries Raman and moves to Bombay, where her sense of maladjustment is intensified by exposure to life in a middleclass joint family, for which her bizarre childhood has left her ill-prepared. The move to a separate apartment does little to improve matters, for Sita continues to chafe at

Raman's conventional values, his excessive rationalism and total immersion i n the mundane world of business affairs. The compliant role she is expected to play in a world characterised by "insularity and complacence" as well as "aggression and violence" generates gradual stages of disenchantment and despair, leading up to Sita's disturbed emotional state during her fifth pregnancy. In her fevered imagination, seemingly trivial incidents become horrific revelations of the chaos and destructiveness she sees as characteristic of postindependence India. Discrete images coalesce into a vision of global violence directed against her unborn child, a symbol of her own insecurity:

They all hammered at her with cruel fists, the fallen blocks, the torn watercolours, the headlines about the war in Viet Nam, the photograph of a woman weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhode"ian jail, articles about the perfidy of Pakistan, the virtuousness of our own India... They were hand grenades all, hurled at her frail goldfish-bowl belly.

In a gesture of rebellion that is also a re-enactment of her mother's desertion, Sita, along with two of her children, Karan and Menaka, abandons her husband to seek shelter in Manori:

"If reality were not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby, safely unborn, by magic". The narrative charts the time she spends on the island, during the monsoon of 1967, wrestling with her private trauma, which is aggravated by the reproachful attitude of her children and the hostility of the caretakers, Moses and Miriam. The text includes, in flashback form, memories of earlier episodes in her life, marking 1947 as a point of transition when Sita's family had first moved to Manori. Faced, now, with the starkness of the nearprimitive living conditions on the island, where her father had barred the entry of modern technology, Sita begins to realise that her idyllic image of Manori was an illusion, created and sustained by her father. She is forced to admit that her father's rhetoric had been fostered by deliberate falsehoods, which she herself, as well as the islanders, had supported out of loyalty. This stripping away of illusion creates the ground for Sita's eventual acceptance of her circumstances and her decision to return to the mainland.

Such is the background to Sita's temporary rejection of the maternal role. She has no desire to abort the child in her womb; as Shyam M. Asnani points out, her stance represents Desai's questioning of a society that regards woman as a "breeding machine". Sita's urge to violate the "normal" biological cycle expresses the will to subvert the reductive identification of femininity with reproductive functions, as well as protectiveness towards a child who is also a metaphor for her own vulnerability:

"More and more she lost all feminine, all maternal belief in childbirth, all faith in it, and began to fear it as yet one more act of violence and murder in a world that had more of them in it than she could take". Her longing for liberation from maternity as a restrictive role is also contextualised in terms of an unsatisfactory marriage which leaves little room for communication, or for the articulation of desire. Her obsession with the hitchhiker accidentally encountered on the road and her treasured memory of a fleeting glimpse of an old man's tenderness for an ailing young woman are pointers to a repressed eroticism that threatens to transgress the prescribed limits of female sexuality encoded in marriage and motherhood.

Although Sita balks at the oppressiveness of cultural inscriptions of maternity, she does not reject mothering as a nurturing and life-sustaining attitude. The obverse of her fear of destructive violence is an urge to cherish and protect, expressed, for instance, in her anxiety over the fate of the injured eagle targeted by bloodthirsty crows (prefiguring her fierce protectiveness towards the child in her womb). There is thus a basic ambiguity in Desai's textual projection of the maternal: while hegemonic constructions of motherhood are presented as reductive or repressive, the association of maternity with the capacity for love and nurture is valorised as an alternative to divisive and destructive forces in the contemporary world. This ambiguity is generally overlooked in critical interpretations of the ending of the novel, which has been variously read as a defeatist concession to traditional systems, a valorisation of critical realism over the mythic mode, and an expression of Desai's "firm conviction in the affirmative human values." Although there is a suggestion of closure in Sita's return to the domestic fold, the ending does not really resolve the dilemma that torments her divided subjectivity.

She now accepts the inevitability of the birth of her child, but the prospect of childbirth does not offer her anyjoy: "once the infant was born, ... Sita would lie still as though paralysed in a fearful accident, with blue lips and a grey sensation of death". Here, the customary celebration of maternity is deliberately overturned. The ambiguity of the ending is prefigured in the ironic authorial stance implicit throughout the novel. While sympathy for Sita is generated through the evocation of an alien present and a hostile past, there is also a suggested critique of her escapist pursuit of illusion at the expense of reality. The chief mouthpiece for this textual comment is Raman, the practical realist whose sarcasm serves as a reminder that what looms large in Sita's imagination might strike others as merely trivial. Reinforcing this ironic distance are several other figures in the narrative, notably Menaka, the future scientist, who rejects her mother's emotional temperament, and the islanders, especially Moses, whose remarks at the beginning and end of the novel provide the frame within which the main narrative is placed. The ironic perspective points at the dangers of Sita's tendency to categorise experience in terms of polarised opposites, such as island/ mainland, illusion/reality, violence/peace, society/

solitude, or imagination/reason. Sita's acceptance of the prospective birth of her child is thus symbolic of a larger reconciliation with the configuration of circumstances constitutive of her particular history, a history that permits only a limited possibility of intervention, located in her sensitivity to violence and injustice and her advocacy of love and nurture.

Desai's use of the Ramayana myth underscores the cultural specificity of projections of the maternal in the novel. In the epic, as Sudhir Kakar points out, it is the fact of Sita's maternity which is seen to justify her reintegration into society following the doubts cast on her purity after abduction and exile; "Rama repents and is ready to take Sita back from her exile in the forest after he sees his sons for the first time". The story, however, has subversive potential, if Sita's return to her mother, the earth, is read as an act of defiance against unjust societal norms." Both dimensions of the myth find expression in Desai's use of the name for a protagonist who locates in the maternal the crux of her split subjectivity.

In Clear Light of Day, two sisters, Bim and Tara, try to recollect their childhood when they meet after a long separation in their family home in Old Delhi. They remember their childhood dreams, the "summer of '47," the death of their parents, and the gradual disintegration of their family. Their brother, Raja, has settled in Hyderabad after marrying the daughter of their Muslim neighbour, Hyder Ali; Tara, married to a diplomat, is now the proud mother of two children. Bim, a university teacher, has remained single, staying behind in the old house to take care of their autistic brother Baba, and their alcoholic aunt, Mira Masi, who eventually commits suicide. The sisters' twin foray into the past becomes an attempt to retrieve lost or repressed childhood selves, as a way of coining to terms with their present predicament. Differences in attitude and temperament become sharply highlighted in their divergent responses to the same recollected episodes. Encounter with a sibling who is also an "other," makes each sister aware of her own shortcomings. Bim, watching her widely-travelled sister, realises that her claim of independence is an illusion, masking the actual stagnancy of her existence in Old Delhi. Tara, who normally prides herself on being a perfect wife and mother, realises that she has dwindled into a mere shadow of her husband, Bakul.

Perhaps the virtual absence of the mother is the most poignant feature of their recollections. Their mother's withdrawal from domestic affiliations is signalled by her preoccupation with playing cards, even in her dying moments. Although her negligence is presented in a pejorative light, in terms of its devastating effect upon her children, the text suggests that their mother's attitude was the result of prolonged, passive suffering inflicted by a dominating husband. One of Tara's earliest memories is the visual image of her father plunging a needle into her mother's arm: "Tara had fled, trembling, because she was sure she had seen her father kill her mother. All her life Tara had experienced that fear-her father had killed her mother". The description, with its projection of female helplessness in the face of male aggression within the sanctioned framework of matrimony, carries explicit associations of sexual violence and death, triggering the subconscious fear which haunts Tara's relationship with her own husband.

Motherhood is thus projected as part of a larger framework of gendered social hierarchies, all of which place women in a subordinate position. Along with traditional images of maternity, conventional representations of romantic love and marriage are also subjected to critical scrutiny. Witnessing the Misra sisters' struggle for survival after their husbands have abandoned them, Bim is struck by the irony of their songs, which reiterate the malecentred romantic myth of Radha's love for Krishna: "the songs always Radha's in praise of Krishna, the dance always Radha pining for Krishna". The idealisation of romantic love in the arts is undercut by the hypocrisy which threatens Tara's marriage. Bakul, whose self-defined diplomatic mission is to ignore the harsher aspects of life in India in order to project a glamorous image of his country, carries his habitual posturing into private life as well. Seeking to monopolise his wife's attention, he summons up images from Persian art:

He thought how nice it would be to have Tara stop looking so preoccupied and concerned and be impressed by h im instead. Really, it was a night of Persian glamour and beauty. They should be sitting together in the moonlight, looking together at the moon that hung over the garden like some great priceless pearl.

In the frosen postures evoked by the description, there is no room for the woman to express her real desires. Tara, forced to repress her spontaneity in order to win his approval, knows the falseness of the veneer of sophistication she has acquired: "it was all just dust thrown into his eyes, dust". In this context, Tara's pride in her daughters appears in a reductive light, as an instance of compliance arising from her limited vision. For a novel about family life, Clear Light of Day has a surprisingly large number of characters who are single women, surviving on the periphery of a society that regards marriage and motherhood as the primary female goal. Bim has several shadow selves who inhabit this impossible realm. The plight of Mira Masi, a poor, childless widow, is only an extreme version of the dependency of the Mishra sisters, back in their father's house after their marriages have failed, trying now to eke out a meagre living from music and dance lessons while their brothers lead an indolent life.

Ironically, it is upon Mira Masi and Bim, women outside the normal parameters of matrimony and biological maternity, that the burden of mothering descends. The role of nurturer is not chosen by Mira Masi, but thrust upon her by circumstances. She seizes it as a way of justifying her presence in the Das household, accepting the parasitism of those around her: They drew from her and she gave readily-she could not have not given. Would il weaken lie " - Would she

> lie stronger if she pul them away and stood by herself, alone? No, that was not her way any more than it was the way of nature ... She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth.

There are suggestions of an ecofeminist stance in the imagery of this passage. The capacity for love is valorised even as its exploitation by others is exposed; the twin face of mothering is invoked. The willingness to give takes its toll of surrogate mothers in this novel. It drives Mira Masi to alcoholism and suicide, and Bim to the brink of nervous collapse. What gives Bim the resilience to evade the fate of Mira Masi is an intuitive apprehension of her connectedness to others:

> With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives... That soil contained all time, past and future, in it ... It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her.

This epiphanic insight enables B im to rise above her solipsism and to overcome her resentment against her family members, especially Raja. The ending, however, leaves Bim with options that are pathetically limited, generating a mood of acceptance that could be read, at a superficial level, as compliance with the middle-class Indian woman's prescribed role as homemaker. Shirley Chew draws our attention to the unresolved trauma of Mira Masi, whose tragedy continues to haunt the narrative.

Certainly, the text resists closure at the end, but however tenuous the affirmative implications of Bim's visionary moment, the feeling persists, borne out by instances throughout the text, that what merits criticism is not the capacity for nurture, but the exploitation to which it leaves one vulnerable. Love itself, as an act of reaching out to others, is projected as a unifying and sustaining force in a world otherwise riven by violence, separation, and death. Bim's family disintegrates at the precise moment in history when independent India is born in the bloodbath of the Partition. As Alamgir Hashmi points out, the three houses in Old Delhi, inhabited by the Das family, the Hyder Alis and the Mishras, represent the predicament of a particular segment of Indian society, caught in a moment of transition that demands "compromising tradition with change". Hyder Ali's departure for Hyderabad becomes a symbol of the communal tensions and separatist politics which become associated with the founding of the new nation. To these divisive forces, Bim's newfound philosophy of love suggests an alternative.

It also counters the detachment that had characterised the Das family at the time of the Partition riots. Following his illness, Raja, dropping his dreams of heroism and disappointing his nationalist friends at Hindu College, had married Hyder Ali's daughter and settled into a life of complacent consumerism, leaving Bim to tackle the family business as well as the burden of caring for Baba and Mira Masi. Tara had left the country, using Bakul as "an instalment of escape", and Baba had retreated into the irrelevant world of Western pop music. Bim, stranded with family responsibilities, had given up the idea of marriage, seething with rage when her suitor, Dr. Biswas, had misinterpreted her situation as one of voluntary self-sacrifice in the mode popularised by literature and cinema. Dieter Riemenschneider argues that, in Clear Light of Day, history and individuals seem linked by coincidence rather than by the intrinsic logic we encounter in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children.

However, it is at an epistemologica! Level beyond the logical that Desai's text locates Bim's eventual awareness of the interconnectedness of "separate histories". The musical performance which triggers Bim's epiphany suggests modes of apprehension that are intuitive and emotional, in contrast to the "factual" truth-claims of conventional historiography. This unusual approach to history also has a gendered dimension, for in place of the public feats of heroism traditionally celebrated by historians, Desai's text foregrounds other, private histories which find a nodal point of intersection in the subjectivity of a woman who learns to embrace mothering as her vocation. Quotations from multiple sources, musical, poetic and historical, jostle for attention in this self-consciously literary novel; but instead of the circularity of the self-reflexive postmodern narrative, Desai's text gestures insistently towards the existence of a "real" world with which it is imperative to connect. In her role as substitute mother, Bim discovers her own mode of connection.

In Journey to Ithaca, the domain of the mother is no longer the private sphere, but the public forum of the ashram, a place for collective pursuit of the spiritual. The title of "Mother" here signifies, not nurture and sacrifice, but the powerful role of spiritual leadership. A symbol of female power, this enigmatic character adds a different dimension to Desai's exploration of the ambiguous potential of the trope of maternity. The figure of the Mother in this novel is part of a central triangle of characters whose personal pilgrimages form the backbone of a narrative that spans several continents in a time frame stretching from the early part of the century to the 1970s. Inspired by Hermann Hesse's Journey to the East, Matteo, a young Italian, joins the hippie influx into India in the 1970s. With him is Sophie, his German wife, whose practical spirit is repelled by the squalor she encounters in India. Their wanderings lead them to the ashram of the Mother, whose charisma leaves no one untouched except Sophie. Neglected by Matteo, and jealous of his devotion to the Mother, Sophie sets out to uncover the Mother's life-story, hoping to expose the so-called spiritual leader as a fraud.

The story of another quest unfolds as Sophie's journey retraces the steps of Laila (the Mother's original name), whose wild spirit sought expression in a dramatic blend of passion, creativity, and spiritual emotion. The trail leads to Egypt, where the young Laila grew up i n a society divided between colonial modernisation and religious traditionalism; to Paris, where, as a guest of her own relatives and a trainee in Western dance, she discovered her alienation from her own milieu; to Venice, where, as "Leela," shejoined the Indian dance troupe led by Krishna, her guru and lover, and thence to New York, where disillusionment led to physical and mental breakdown. A longlost diary records Laila's responses to her arrival in India, and her encounter with the sage who introduces her to the spiritual path, becoming her mentor and perhaps her lover. Sophie's journey brings her back to the Indian ashram, where she hears that the Mother has died, and Matteo, distraught, has vanished. She must now undertake another quest, this time to seek out Matteo: "Now she knew why the mother went on that pilgrimage, why anyone goes on a pilgrimage, and why she must go too".

In this palimpsestic narrative, the repetition of the quest motif suggests a link between the destinies of Sophie and the Mother, in spite of their differences in age, temperament, and personal circumstances. The shared spirit of questioning and rebellion which connects their separate stories suggests the persistence and ubiquity of prejudices that thwart women from acting as free agents in society. Laila, the misfit-turned-rebel, is a protofeminist figure, whose spirit, the text suggests, lives on in Sophie. Unlike Sita and Bim, middle-class women trapped by domesticity, Laila and Sophie reject the security of home and hearth to satisfy a wanderlust which is really a desire to discover an authentic identity. The India they encounter strikes them as alien and treacherous, yet it is here that they experience visionary moments that indicate the future course of their lives.

Both the Mother's adoption of the spiritual way, and Sophies compulsion to go in search of Matteo, are assumptions of responsibility, involving an acceptance of the need to reach out and care for others.

For Laila, the absence of domestic constraints, especially those associated with biological motherhood, creates the special condition of her rootlessness, as well as an enabling factor in her metamorphosis into the Mother. The Mother's authority derives from a negation of the traditional attributes of maternity, because her elevated status is based on an ascetic renunciation of the domestic and, ostensibly, of the physical and sexual. The trajectory of Laila's life subverts conventional projections of biology as female destiny: "becoming the Mother" is a process of female self-empowerment which represents Desai's ironic appropriation of the patriarchal formulation of "femininity as maternity." That the Mother enjoys her power and dislikes competition is evident in her manipulative marginalisation of Sophie in order to monopolise Matteo's devotion. The struggle to possess Matteo's soul highlights the moral ambiguity of the actions of the two women who love him. While Sophie's self-righteous wish to expose the Mother's hypocrisy has distinct overtones of jealousy and revenge, the Mother's real motives remain equally dubious.

Is she the saint her disciples, especially Matteo, take her to be, or the power-hungry woman whose malignancy Sophie claims to detect beneath the mask of sanctity? We are never quite sure. Unlike Laila, Sophie is a wife and mother, but, like several other mothers in Desai's fiction, she is irresponsible. She abandons her children, Isabel and Giacomo, leaving them with their grandparents at Matteo's family home on Lake Como, while she pursues her personal goals. Her privileged social background makes this neglect of domestic duties possible, until, at the end of her pilgrimage, she arrives at an apprehension of the paradoxical relationship between freedom and responsibility. With this understanding, she is ready, like Sita and B im before her, to accept the demands of her particular situation. The task of mothering those dependent on her-especially her husband leaves her open to the possibility of exploitation; but then, as Desai's texts repeatedly suggest, this is a risk that the gift of love must entail.

Caught between these two assertive women, Matteo emerges as an elusive, almost insubstantial figure. Brought up by an overprotective mother (who anticipates Laila's transformation into the Mother as figure of authority), Matteo, as a child, is ill equipped for survival in the brutally mas uline world of the school in Turin to which he is sent. Lon ly and withdrawn, he rejects the violence involved in "le rning to be a man", turning instead to the philosophy of peace and spirituality, to which his tutor, Fabio, introduces him. Like the protagonists of Desai's male-centred novels, In Custody and Baumgartner s Bombay, Matteo, the impractical dreamer, represents an interrogation of gendered stereotypes. An incurable romantic, Matteo continues, in adult life, to seek refuge in relationships with women stronger than himself. In the fictional world of Journey to Ithaca, women as substitute mothers are empowered to challenge the existing order, while the male protagonist remains, in spite of his visionary qualities, a victim rather than a survivour.

Anita Desai's narativisation of the maternal as a site for potential female self-empowerment remains, however, too ambiguous to be read as a naive celebration of autonomy for women. The relocation of the maternal in the sphere of spiritual activity represents a step beyond the private world into the realm of collectivity, but it still remains relatively segregated from the arena of mainstream public life. Both the Mother and Sophie remain aloof from the Indian characters, especially the women, who hover on the fringes of the narrative, suggesting the persistence of mental and cultural barriers yet to be crossed. These figures on the margin signify, perhaps, the need to reformulate, in the context of contemporary India, other, even more enabling, incarnations of the maternal.

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